

1. " . . . Jesus went over the Sea of Galilee . . . . Jesus went up on a mountain . . . Jesus lifted up His eyes . . . . Jesus said to Philip . . . . He Himself knew what He would do . . . . one of His disciples . . . . Jesus said, Make the people sit down . . . . Jesus took the loaves . . . . when He had given thanks . . . . He distributed to the disciples . . . . "

-- what do these references tell us about the basic nature and character of Jesus Christ? What characteristics of Jesus come readily to mind as you read this entire passage? Would you say that Jesus is perceptive, compassionate, self-confident, authoritative, etc.??

2. " . . . . a great multitude followed Him . . . . "

-- What are the characteristics of a great crowd of people? Must a crowd always have a leader? Why do people follow a leader? Why did that crowd follow Jesus? How much integrity do you attach to their following Him? Does Jesus attract a multitude today? Why and how are crowds attracted to Him today? What are the characteristics essential for leadership? How does Jesus exemplify these characteristics?

3. "He said to Philip . . . . "

-- What do you know about Philip? Why do you suppose Jesus singled him out -- thought first of him? How often do you think Christ would turn first to you as one of His disciples?

-- What significance do you attach to the fact that Jesus took the initiative in this situation? Is this typical of Him?

4. ". . . . that these may eat . . . . "

-- Which comes first: man's physical or spiritual needs? What significance do you attach to the fact that Jesus first thought in terms of bread? If you operated a store-front mission with a soup kitchen, would you preach to them before you fed them?

5. ". . . . to test him . . . . "

-- What does this verse mean to you? What was Christ testing? How does Christ test us in this regard?

6. "Philip answered Him, '200 denarii is not enough . . . . "

-- What does this answer tell you about Philip? Was it an 'honest' answer? Was it a 'realistic' answer? How else might he have answered? How would you have answered?

7. "... Andrew, Simon Peter's brother ..."
- Who was Andrew? What do you think of that identification bit -- 'Simon Peter's brother'? Was it a help or hindrance?
8. "... there is a lad here ..."
- Where did he come from? Where did he get what he had?
9. "... but what are they among so many? ..."
- Is this observation an honest assessment? How negative is this remark? What else could Andrew have said? What would you have said?
10. "... Make the people sit down ..."
- What does this directive indicate to you? Why was it necessary?
11. "... and Jesus took the loaves ..."
- How essential is this action to the performance of the miracle?
12. "... and when He had given thanks ..."
- For what? to whom? why?  
-- How essential is this action for the performance of the miracle?
13. "... and when they were filled ..."
- How did this happen? What strategy was employed? Why did Jesus satisfy their hunger pangs? How is Christ satisfying the hunger pangs of the world today?
14. "... which were left over ..."
- Suppose we refer to this part of the passage as "Love's Left-overs" -- what are they? What happens to them?
15. "... when they had seen the sign that Jesus did ..."
- Christ got the credit for what happened -- what was His part in this miracle? What was the disciples' part? What was the part of the boy? The boy's mother who prepared the lunch? What is essential in order to have a miracle? Is this more a case-study in the faith of Christ than it is a case-study in the faith of the disciples?

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**Sermons Preached by the Rev. Raymond Shaheen, D.D.**

| <u>Year: 1981</u> | <u>SERMON TITLE</u>                       | <u>TEXT</u>      |         |
|-------------------|-------------------------------------------|------------------|---------|
| January 11        | "A Sermon For An Anniversary"             | Acts 2:1         | MISSING |
| January 18        | "To Meet A Need" On Being A Neighbor      | Luke 10:25-37    |         |
| January 25        | "On Living In Two Worlds"                 | Hebrews 11:27    |         |
|                   | "On Being Ready"                          | Matthew 25:1-13  | ↓       |
|                   | A LENTEN Series                           |                  |         |
|                   | "Jesus"                                   |                  |         |
| March 8           | "Jesus: Like No Other"                    | Colossians 2:9   |         |
| March 15          | * "Jesus: The Man Who Prayed"             | Luke 11:1        |         |
| March 22          | "Jesus: The Man Who Made Strange Friends" | Matthew 2:10-13  |         |
| March 29          | "Jesus: The Man Who Performed Miracles"   |                  |         |
| April 5           | "Jesus: The Man Who Died"                 |                  |         |
| April 12          | Palm Sunday                               |                  | MISSING |
| April 19          | * Easter Day                              |                  | ↓       |
| April 26          | "What God Wants Most To Give"             | Luke 11:5-13     |         |
| May 3             | * "O'er Hill and Dale"                    | Mark 4:1-9       |         |
| May 17            | "Now About Forgiveness"                   | Matthew 8:21-35  |         |
| May 24            | "In Praise of Strategy"                   | Luke 16:1-13     |         |
| May 31            | "Only One Way"                            | Matthew 25:31-46 |         |
| June 7            | "In The Meantime"<br>Pentecost            | Acts 2:1         | MISSING |
| June 14           | "Rich Man Beggar Man"                     | Luke 16:19-31    |         |
| June 21           | "Two Men"                                 | Luke 18:9-14     |         |

1981 Continued

| <u>Year: 1981</u> | <u>SERMON TITLE</u>                          | <u>TEXT</u>           |         |
|-------------------|----------------------------------------------|-----------------------|---------|
| June 28           | "Lost and Found"                             | Luke 15:3-10          |         |
| July 5            | "How Ought One To Pray For His Country"      | Psalms 67:2           | MISSING |
| July 12           | "The Third Story of A Trilogy: Three People" | Luke 15:11-32         |         |
| July 19           | "God In Slow Motion"                         | Luke 17:11-19         |         |
| July 26           | "How To Handle What Others Say About You"    | II Corinthians 6:8-10 |         |
| August 2          | "How To Handle What You Say To Yourself"     | Luke 15:17            |         |
| August 9          | "How To Get Along With One Another"          | Romans 12:14-18       |         |
| August 16         | "God – The Banquet Giver"                    | Luke 14:12-24         |         |
| August 23         | "When God Makes Much of Little"              |                       |         |
| September 6       | * "In The Beginning"<br>Labor Day Sermon     | John 1:2-3            |         |
| September 13      | * "You Can't Take It With You"               | Luke 12:13-21         | MISSING |
| September 20      | "When Is A Person Religious"                 | Luke 18:9-14          |         |
| September 27      | "Truest Treasure"                            | Matthew 13:44-46      |         |
| October 4         | * "Communion Meditation"                     |                       |         |
| November 1        | * "Sinner or Saint?"                         | I John 3:2            |         |
| November 8        | * "Something Happy – Something Glad"         | Luke 15:15-24         |         |
| November 15       | "God's Assets"                               | Matthew 25:14-30      |         |
| November 22       | "Like A Dying Thief"                         | Luke 23:43            |         |
| November 29       | "As The Invisible Becomes Visible"           | John 1:18             |         |
| December 20       | "Christmas: God's Brand New Idea"            | Judges 13:8           |         |
| December 24       | "Touch of Madness"                           | Luke 2:11             |         |

1981 Continued

Year: 1981

SERMON TITLE

TEXT

December 27

"To Grow In Faith"

Luke 18:8 *missing*

4/10/88  
Sermon - Pastor Raymond Shaheen  
The First Sunday in Lent

March 8, 1981

Scripture Series: JESUS THE MAN: WHO HE WAS AND  
WHAT HE DID  
"JESUS: LIKE NO OTHER"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God  
our father and from His Son Jesus  
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

When I last stood at this sacred desk, the 4th Sunday in January, a cycle of twenty-five years of preaching and pastoral ministry was completed. This fact you so graciously recognized in all that took place that next Sunday, the first Sunday in February. In the five-and-six week interim I have frequently reflected even though I was half a world away, on your celebration of this quarter-of-a-century we've spent together. Of all the things that my mother taught me, what I continue to remember uppermost, I suppose, aside from her introduction to Jesus Christ and her teaching me to pray, is that I should always say thank you. Permit me, then, this personal moment, to thank you again and again.

I was much impressed by so much that you did, and I thought repeatedly not only of the service here in the morning, but of that gala event in the evening when more than 500 of you sat down and broke bread together. I was completely overwhelmed.

But among the things that impressed me most, I have to say to you very quickly, was that four-page folder that somebody had prepared, in which these 25 years together were recalled. And I am profoundly grateful for what was captured in those pages -- the Christo-centric thrust of our ministry together. For whatever else you may or may not think about the time we've spent together, I should like to be remembered as one who counted it great joy to exalt the Lord Jesus Christ in your midst.

Even though it's not carved into stone alongside this pulpit, as it is in the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist in Atlanta, Georgia, so that

every time the preacher goes to the sacred desk his eyes would fall upon this verse from Scripture: "Sir, we would see Jesus" - - in this quarter of a century, every time I've come to this sacred desk I have not been un mindful of so great a responsibility. I would want to share with you Jesus Christ. And whatever relationship I have had with you, no matter where and how it may have been, I would like to think that Jesus Christ came through.

Before I began my ministry I was introduced to John Wesley, that great soul of Methodism, who is supposed to have done more for the English people in his day than any other person. He would get up early in the morning, meet the miners going down into the pits.....he'd be there in the market-place at midday....he'd be there when they came back from the pits in the evening. He kept a journal, and no matter where he went he'd record where he went, the event of the day - - but invariably he'd put down at the bottom of the page: "I gave them Jesus Christ."

I see some of my younger friends here in the front part of the Nave this morning, some with whom I have been associating as they've come to Supper Tuesday, or as I stood with them when they made their promise to Jesus Christ within the shadow of the altar. I should like them to think of me as one who talked with them, and helped to make Jesus Christ increasingly real.

The last time I preached, I preached in South India, in a place where several weeks before me the Archbishop of Canterbury had preached. I was overwhelmed by the responsibility given to me, and the honor. There was a temptation to be erudite, which I am not. And then as I stood at that sacred desk I made plain to them that I might never again see them. In all likelihood, in God's plan for their lives and mine, we would never again meet. I was fully aware of the fact that I was simply passing through....and then I was made aware of the truth that because that happened to be so, there should be no question about it - - I should speak to them clearly and with conviction about Jesus Christ. And I took as the text for my sermon: "What will you do with Jesus who is called Christ?"

In a certain sense, every time I come to this sacred desk I could be passing through. None of us has a guarantee of the next five minutes. None of us can be assured of the next five hours. My soul is made sensitive by the grace of God that as I pass through I would like to think that each Lord's Day, or whenever we've met, the God-factor in Jesus Christ must certainly has been present. For so this and was I made a minister of Jesus Christ.

Now why do I tell you this? When the series of sermons in this Lent in 1981 in Saint Luke Church was being projected, it was made plain to me that the theme should be a very simple one: "JESUS THE MAN: WHO HE WAS AND WHAT HE DID" . . . and today is the introduction to that series. And hopefully Sunday by Sunday during this Lent we'll talk about Jesus Christ. What did He do? What manner of man was He?

The intent is deliberate, for the simple reason that the edge for some of us becomes dull from familiarity. We've known Jesus Christ all our lives... we've sung His praise endlessly. But how well do we really know Him? That's the acid test. There is always the possibility that we could know Him less than what He really is. And that's why some of you who take title seriously could fault me perhaps, for giving this one the caption: "Jesus The Man" - - for are you not quick to say, He was God, Very God of Very God, begotten, not made"- - how can you refer to Him as simply "Jesus The Man"?

But I justify the title and I justify the series, because as the man, God has come through to us in a way that God saw fit to come. And there's a text for today's sermon, the sermon that bears the title: "Jesus: Like No Other" - - and the text is the 9th verse of the 2nd chapter of Paul's Letter to the Colossians:

"In him all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell" - - a magnificent thing to say about Jesus Christ! - - in Him all that God is you can find. Therefore, if you are looking for something that God is, you

find crystallized in human form, in Jesus Christ. To bring Him into proper focus is the purpose of this series.

Now let me tell you again what I may have told you some time before. I had a friend who anticipated the once-in-a-lifetime-journey, knowing full well that he might never again go to the places he was going to visit, and read up on the material, planned for the trip weeks in advance, purchased a fine camera and an abundant supply of film, and took pictures everywhere he went, that he might never forget where he had been and what he had seen

....only to discover that when the film came back from the processing laboratory, every single frame was faulty. The camera had been out of focus the entire time and he never knew it until the journey was over.

This is a lamentable thing, and could be a reading of life for many of us -- to come to journey's end and never have gotten things into proper focus, never to have seen the real thing.

That's the risk we run sometime with Jesus Christ. Some people simply see Him as a teacher, some as a preacher, some as a good man. But you've never really seen Jesus Christ until you've seen Him as the God-Man-Come-In-Human-Form to save us from our sins.

This sermon from this point on now really deals with two questions:

First question -- Where is God to be found?

...good question, really. In the minds of any number of people who are very honest with themselves, where is God to be found?

Occasionally we meet people to whom God is very, very real -- they're always talking about His nearness, they're always talking about His presence, they're always talking about the conversations they've had with God. And that troubles some of you, and on occasion it troubles me. What's wrong with me? Am I short-changed? Is there something wrong in my make-up that God should not be seemingly

as real to me as He is to these other people? Where is God to be found?

...and then I was equally troubled by what we read in the Bible. I quote the Scripture for you now: "Verrily, thou art a God who hidest himself" . . . and the cry of Job: "O that I knew where I might find him!"

Where is God to be found? A good question.

Sometimes there are those who say God is to be found where God chooses to be found, where God makes Himself especially real -- especially present. True, He is to be found anywhere and everywhere, but there are certain times and certain places, certain conditions, certain circumstances where God becomes a bit more real to us. Where is God to be found? We could miss Him, you know, or encounter Him only in part.

When we neared the Allanby Bridge, on our way into Jordan, our guide said to me: "O, he's coming!" I said, "Who's coming?" . . . and then there was a flurry of activity -- here was this long row of parked cars waiting to go through the check-point....and along comes the Mercedes Benz, with the diplomatic flag and several people in the car. And my friend, who is a devout Catholic, says, "There's my Bishop!" He had received a diplomat status -- he was recognized as such. And all this flurry of activity -- there he was! as though no one should miss him, as though no one could miss him, this representative of God.

Quite to the contrary was that sweet thing of whom I read, maybe fourteen years of age -- devoutly sensitive, who was going to a certain place, only to be told, and her soul was on tip-toe, that on that very train would be the Cardinal, a prince of the Church. She had never seen someone so high in the Church, and to think that she might be riding on that very train!

...restless, she went from one coach to another, looking for this prince of the Church. Nowhere did she seem to find him. And she was disappointed....

...when she got off the train she had to walk up a hill to her



destination. Her suitcase was heavy. She trudged along, somewhat weary, only to discover that alongside of her was a tall, gaunt, one-socked man, wearing the simple robe of a priest, who stretched forth his hand to carry her suitcase for her....and as they walked along she told him how disappointed she was -- she'd hoped it would be a day-of-days for her when she had seen a prince of the Church, a Cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church. "But," she said, "I guess he didn't make the train, or he had other plans."

....he never said a word -- simply walked by her side, doing what Christ would do. It was only later that she discovered: this was her prince -- this was the Cardinal . . . and he was to be found, with an outstretched hand, helping someone....no trumpets before him!

Where is God to be found? The Bible says God is to be found in Jesus Christ. Again and again let me remind you what St. Paul says: "In him all the fulness of God is pleased to dwell." We who claim His name -- He's already come to us in Jesus Christ.

The second question as this sermon series is being introduced: "Jesus Christ: Like No Other" -- where is Jesus Christ to be found? -- the Bible says in Jesus. The second question: What language does God speak?

We have been led to believe that God makes Himself known to us. What language does He speak? I ought to tell you about the dear old soul, naive and simple-minded as she was, God bless her -- who as she became older decided to study Hebrew, because she decided when she'd die she'd want to go to Heaven and speak to God in His native language! What language does God speak?

When we were in India we were fortunate, people for the most part speak English. They had to, in the public schools, or they got it from the mission-

aries. But every now and then we'd come across someone who spoke only Tamil, who spoke only Telegu, who spoke only Hindi. It was awkward, it was cumbersome -- lips would move, what were they saying? We did not know the language that they spoke. There was no communication. They didn't understand us, even though we spoke.....we didn't understand them, even though they spoke. Could this be the way with you and God? Does God speak a language that you don't understand?

God wants to be understood. So God has seen fit to speak the language of love. God sees fit to speak language in a human form. You who know me as you do, you can readily understand how at night I was troubled when I slept in India, realizing that less than 2 % of 675 million people know anything at all about God and His fulness, and in His complete form. And the only way that some of them may ever know the language that God speaks is by those who come and personify -- in human form -- a reflection of Jesus Christ.

So I begin this series with you. I'm quite excited about it, really I am. "Jesus The Man: Who He Was and What He Did." The purpose remains, to bring Him into sharp focus. . . .

How can I choose but love thee, God's dear Son,  
O Jesus, loveliest, and most loving One!  
Were there no heaven to gain, no hell to flee,  
For what thou art alone I must love thee.

The world's been changed by people who have responded to the love of God. But you really can't love someone unless you know them. We need to become better acquainted with Him. Let's do it together. To this end I offer you my heart, my hand, my mind and my spirit.

\* \* \* \* \*

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"JESUS THE MAN WHO PRAYED"

QUIET our minds and hush our hearts,  
O God, and make us ready to give  
some measure of undivided attention  
to the preaching of Your Word. Through  
Jesus Christ thy Son our Lord, Who when  
He came, came preaching. Amen.

As announced last Sunday, the sermons for the most part during this Lenten season will be preached upon the general theme of JESUS THE MAN: WHO HE WAS AND WHAT HE DID. For the disciples in the early Church, Jesus Christ became an ever-present reality as they went back and remembered the kind of person He was, and what He did. You can never appreciate Him as He is unless you understand Him as He was.

Jesus the Man. What did He do? Thirty-three years here on this earth -- a reasonable amount of time...three years specifically invested in a ministry. What we know of that three-year period, we now ask the question -- how did He spend His time? What did He do?

If I were to turn this into a kind of classroom exercise and ask you to name the first three things that come to your mind as you think of Jesus Christ here on earth -- what did He do? . . . if I were a gambling man I think I know what most of your answers would be:

...you'd say, why, He preached -- He spent so much of His time going around preaching

...you'd say, He spent a great deal of His time going around teaching

...and of course you'd say very quickly and earnestly, He spent a considerable amount of time performing miracles, doing wonder-

works . . . .

Am I right? Do I read you correctly? Those could be the first three things that would come to your mind when the question would be asked: What did Jesus do?

...maybe here and there one of you might say, O yes, He had a way, that dynamic person that He was, of inspiring people and gathering around Him a coterie of folk who eventually became His disciples and who eventually, beyond that, if one may use that figure of speech — "turned the world upside-down," by making an impact upon the age in which they lived that continues even to this day.....

What did Jesus do? Preached...taught....performed miracles...invested His time in a handful of men who left their mark.

Today's sermon bears the title: "The Man Jesus — Who Prayed." And the text is the first verse of the 11th chapter of the Gospel according to Luke:

"And it came to pass that as he was praying in a certain place, one of his disciples came to him and said, Lord, teach us to pray."

I make bold to suggest to you that you'll never see Him as He actually was until you first see Him as the Man-of-Prayer.

I suppose we're fascinated by His miracles....I suppose we're inspired by the way He taught. And I suppose we're equally impressed by the way He was that dynamic preacher — preaching so effectively they could say of Him, "Never a man preached the way he preached!" Maybe we stand in awe of this kind of thing. And so we relate to Him first and think of Him rather as the preacher, the teacher, the miracle-worker. Why do we so seldom think of Him as the Man-of-Prayer?

Again I say to you, you never really see Jesus Christ as He actually was, you can never really appreciate Him until you see Him as the Man of Prayer. For pray He did, and this was the secret of His life.

I am profoundly grateful for the church in which I grew up in that small Pennsylvania town. For as a youngster, when I went to church the preacher seldom gripped me by his sermon. I respected him greatly as a man of God, for a God-fearing soul he was, and he reeked with the integrity of one who was a faithful servant of his Lord. But my mind would wander as he preached... ..and we didn't have the best music in the world, as you might know, in a small town where you have little talent . . . my mind would wander a great deal. But I am grateful that there was always a focal point to which I could return, there was always something that gripped me. It was a heroic-size painting of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, a reproduction-of-sorts of Heinrich Hofmann's "Christ In The Garden" . . . and to this very day that impression remains - - I dare say when I first think of Jesus Christ, I think of Him on His knees, a man of prayer.

For a man of prayer He was. Read the pages of the New Testament and you discover for yourself how again and again and again He was known to be at prayer. Every great moment in His life was either preceded or followed by prayer . . .

— what was happening when the heavens opened and He was declared God's favorite Son, in Whom the Heavenly Father was well pleased . . . He was at prayer:

— what was He doing the night before He chose the twelve disciples? (do you realize what a awesome thing that was — to choose twelve people out of all the people He would encounter, and allow them to be His special ones) - - what was He doing the night before He made His choices? He was praying.

— then there was that time when they came to make Him a King! What was the first thing He wanted to do when He

discovered that kind of acclimation? -- He was driven to His knees -- you can read about it in the Bible for yourself.....

-- when He saw what was ahead -- the crucifixion -- where do you find Him? . . . in Gethsemane, praying, that He might be found an obedient son.....

-- hanging upon the cross, with His life ebbing away in that tortuous manner -- what's He doing? . . . praying.

You never really understand Jesus Christ until you first see Him as the Man of Prayer.

I need to tell you this, honestly I do . . . sometimes you have difficulty relating to Jesus Christ because of the things He did. You may respect Him as a preacher, but you say to yourself, I can't relate to Him as a preacher because I've never preached.....

...you may admire Him as a teacher, and yet you may say to yourself, I can't relate to Him as a teacher because I can't teach....

...and surely you may find difficulty in relating to Him as a miracle-worker because you're not scheduled to perform any miracles in the near future.....

But did it ever occur to you that it lies within the capability of every single one of us to relate to Jesus Christ because He prayed. We too can pray! And every time you pray you're doing something that Jesus did. That's a happy thought! You might not be able to preach, to teach, to perform miracles or even recruit followers.....but you can do something that He did -- you can pray.

It's a gladsome thing to be able to relate to Christ. Robert Speare, a distinguished Presbyterian churchman of several generations ago, wrote a little book, and in that little book he talks about that very common ordinary carpenter -- simple-minded, not much to offer in this world to people, but who knew tremendous satisfaction when he realized that Jesus was a carpenter because that's

exactly what his trade was.....how he'd go to church -- not make much of a dent upon the preacher or the people present -- perhaps they'd hardly notice that he was there.....and then he'd go home after church, have Sunday dinner with his wife to whom he was married 40 years, and then -- she knew him like a book, she could read him that way.....shortly after dinner he'd reach for the key, he'd go back to his carpenter shop.....

-- there's a poem that talks about Jesus the Carpenter. It's quaint, it's warm-souled, not much for poetry -- I can't tell you who wrote it, but it pictures this simple man going to his carpenter shop and reaching for something. And what do you suppose it was? -- not a saw, not a hammer, not a plane. He was reaching for his own prized and cherished copy of the Scriptures, and he'd keep turning to a certain place -- he never marked it with a marker, because, he said, he wanted to come upon it like a surprise, and then read it: Jesus, the Carpenter ....and then he'd say to himself, "the same trade as me!"

"'Isn't this Joseph's son?' Aye it is He.  
'Joseph the Carpenter' - same trade as me!  
I thought I'd find it, I knew it was here,  
But my sight's getting queer.

Don't know right where as His shed might ha' stood,  
But often, as I've been a-planing my wood,  
I've took off my hat just what thinking of He  
At the same work as me.

He weren't that set up that He couldn't stoop down  
And work in the country for folks in the town.  
And I'll warrant He felt a bit pride like I've done  
At a good job begun.

The parson he knows that I'll not make too free,  
But on Sundays I feel as pleased as can be  
When I wears my clean smock and sets in a pew  
And has thoughts not a few.

I think of as how not the parson hissen,  
As is teacher and father and shepherd of men,  
Not he knows as much of the Lord in that shed  
Where He earned His own bread.

And when I goes home to my missus, says she,  
'Are you wanting your key?'  
For she knows my queer ways and my love for the shed  
(we've been 40 years wed)

So I comes right away by mysen with the book,  
And I turns the old pages and has a good look  
For the text as I've found as tells me as He  
Were the same trade with me.

'Why don't I mark it?' Ah, many says so!  
But I think I'd as lief, with your leave, let it go.  
It do seem that nice when I fall on it sudden,  
Unexpected, you know."

It's a happy thought. You, too, you relate to Jesus Christ whenever you pray.

He prayed often, you can read that. He prayed much, and in depth -- not just a casual look toward Heaven. Would you believe me if I were to tell you that Martin Luther used to say that the demands on his day were such that he couldn't possibly get through a day without spending at least three hours -- three hours in prayer!

It was on a Sunday, about four weeks ago today, that Pastor David and I, in New Delhi, went to visit the memorial to Mahatma Gandhi, a man who helped transform India...that little, insignificant, pale, emaciated form of humanity, who when he died left behind him a loin-cloth, a pair of sandals, a book and a pair of spectacles. How was he able to do what he did? Gandhi religiously and faithfully kept one quiet day a week when he did nothing but nurture his spiritual life.

What did Jesus pray for? Good question, really. I don't know that I know, except that the Scriptures say occasionally, He prayed for other people, and that's something to remember....

-- He prayed for one disciple in particular, that his faith  
would not fail him....

-- He prayed for Himself, that He might be found His Heavenly  
Father's obedient Son....

Now that's a page to take from the book of Jesus the Man Who Prayed -- He prayed for Himself, that He might be found faithful, and obedient.

He prayed for other people, that they might be found faithful. I count for



each of you to think that for some of you each day there is someone who is praying for you. When I am tempted to sin, when I am tempted to be less than I know I was meant to be, occasionally I draw that tremendous measure of strength in the realization that my mother is still praying for me. If she prayed for me while she was here on earth, don't I have reason to believe that sin's still praying for me in Heaven? — with perhaps even a greater impact. Every single one of us is someone for whom someone is praying....and even our blessed Lord constantly prays for us.

This congregation is being transformed spiritually because, I am happy to tell you . . .

...oh, I should tell you this, incidentally — when Pastor David and I were in India, you'd be surprised how every now and then they'd ask us to quit talking about the thing we were talking about and said: "Tell us about the church from which you come." — there's a hunger on their part to learn about what's going on here in the West. And neither one of us knew greater measure of pride — and I use that in a healthy sense of the word — when we'd be able to tell about Saint Luke Church . . . where there are Prayer Partners who lift up in the arms of their prayers every single day every home in the congregation....

People don't pray like they used to pray, somebody said. And just as quickly somebody else said, And people don't do things like they used to do. The two things go together. Jesus received strength in order to persevere with patience — only as He prayed. He knew the mind of God only as He prayed — — then was He able to communicate it to others.

When Norman Vincent Peale, so I am told, became the Pastor of Marble Collegiate Church on Fifth Avenue, New York, he very graciously and generously went out on the platform the very first Sunday and held in his hand a pillow....and those nearest the front could easily see two well-worn spots on that pillow —

knee-prints, if you please. And as he held up that pillow he said very properly and generously and graciously to the congregation: "This is where my predecessor, that beloved man of God who ministered to you before I came -- this is where he got his sermons!"

I covet for this congregation an increasing number of people who pray daily -- for themselves and for one another. One of the happy things that I would like to think in time that more and more find it possible to come to this place to pray. You can pray anywhere. But some of us need a focal point, some of us need to go deliberately to a particular place, where it's made easier to think the thoughts of God. The doors are open . . . may your number increase.

As I walk away from this sacred desk would you believe me if I were to tell you what is a commonplace: the more often I pray, the nearer I feel the presence of God.....and the nearer I am to Him, the more I am drawn to you. And that's something to think about.

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(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

1/2-7/81

Samson - Pastor Raymond Shaheen  
The Third Sunday in Lent

March 22, 1981

"JESUS THE MAN WHO MADE STRANGE FRIENDS"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God our  
Father and from His Son Jesus Christ,  
our Blessed Lord. Amen.

How old was He? He was only 33. And that brings me up short occasionally when I realize that God has given me, as one person, to live almost twice as long as He did. He was cut short quite young, you see, barely reaching the prime of life. He was only 33.

What a pity, you say. What a pity. And only three years on the road as a preacher at that -- to be cut down so soon! How could it have happened, you ask -- how could it have happened? Would you be about to accept this as an answer: He associated with the wrong kind of people.

Come now, these Sundays during Lent we're thinking on the general theme of "Jesus The Man -- Who He was and What He did." Like as not, as soon as you begin to think about Him you think of Him as a preacher, which He was. Never man preached with the authority that He did. He gave people these wonderful word pictures of God, and as He was preaching people had a way of reverently putting their fingers to their lips and whispered the name of God -- He made God that real to them. But it wasn't His preaching, really, that got Him into trouble....

He was a great teacher -- no question about that. And no matter where He went He had a way of giving people unforgettable lessons. But it wasn't what He taught that really got Him into trouble at the end. That isn't what did Him in....

You remember Him as a miracle-worker -- and that He was! And people followed Him and acclaimed Him when they saw the works that He did on so many people. But they didn't find fault with Him because He changed water into wine and made blind men see, and lame men walk, and brought a dead man back to life! . . .

He had a way of recruiting people, that dynamic charismatic quality of this

personality -- they really didn't crucify Him because of twelve people who followed Him! . . . .

To a very large degree, honestly, what caused Him to be done in at the end was because they never quite forgave Him for associating with the kind of people that He did. And that's the title for today's sermon: "Jesus --" as you think of the man: who He Was and What He Did -- "Who Made Strange Friends."

I give it to you on good authority. Any reference in Scripture, perhaps -- any number of them, I could say, will justify it. For our purpose this morning it is the 9th chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew. Listen to me as I read it for you:

"And as He sat at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and sat down with Jesus and His disciples. And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to His disciples, 'Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?' But when He heard it, He said 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick -- Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners' . . . ."

There you have it, and His word for it, and His example, loudly and clearly. This is the way it happened.

It was a great day for Matthew. No other day quite like it in Matthew's life. He went to work as usual, sat in the seat of custom. He was a tax collector, making the necessary levy on people who came and went. And that was the day when Jesus tapped him on the shoulder and gave him that beckoning finger and that beckoning look. And Matthew -- seemingly just like that! -- closed the books, walked away, never again to return to that seat of custom...to become a follower of Jesus Christ.

He was so excited, honestly he was, that night, or maybe a couple of nights later, his joy was so great, he said, "Jesus -- come, we've got to have a supper together and I want you to come to my home." And so Jesus went off as the Man-Who-Came-to-Dinner. And when He got there, what do you suppose He found? A lot of church deacons? -- No. A very unlikely sort of people, the Scriptures say --

publicans and sinners, the kind of people, I am about to suggest, that maybe if you looked into the door and you saw them, you'd say, I'm in the wrong place! -- and with a great degree of difficulty, perhaps, you would cross the threshold and then sit-down and be very nervous, and not very much at ease, as you shared the meal with that outfit.

The Scriptures say there were publicans and sinners -- an expression that goes together like the Medes-and-the-Persians -- and we need to remind ourselves repeatedly: Who was a publican? . . . and in that day, Who was a sinner?

The publicans were tax collectors who got their job by appointment from the occupying authority, the Romans. And they had a strange system in those days -- not a regular schedule for levying taxes, but they would say to the tax collector, "Now you know the area where you live. We expect so much in return at the end of the year, but you are perfectly free to make your own schedule." . . . and every one of them, I presume, turned out to be a rascal and exploited his fellow Jew, and he took as much as the traffic would bear.

No wonder the publicans were despised and looked upon as an unsavory lot. They were held, you see, as collaborators with the Roman government, the occupying authority. They were also held in contempt because they exploited their fellow Jews. That's who the publicans were: not well liked, not at all -- despised, outcasts in society.

The sinners? Well, surely some of them committed murder, some of them were thieves, some were adulterers. But by and large, over and above that, they were also called sinners because they didn't have this kind of respect for the law that the Pharisees felt everybody who is a Jew ought to have. They couldn't quite go along with the purists...they couldn't go along with the arrogance which set in so easily, which also became self-righteousness -- "We've got it made! We say so-many prayers, we participate in so-much ritual -- we've got it made!"

....there are people who couldn't stomach that, and I think I'd be numbered among them, honestly. And they kept their distance from so-

called religious people. And they were branded sinners.

Now, this is the kind of people for whom Jesus gave more than the time of the day. He made it His business to associate with them. He made it His business to be friends with them....He made it His business to break bread with them. And above all else, He made it His business to pay attention to them.

Oh, He paid attention to the church people, too. He always knew a measure of delight when He found a response, no matter where He found it -- surprised sometimes to find it inside the church. He looked for it, and made much of it whenever He found it.

But He didn't find it only within the church -- He found it outside the church. And they were branded as lost, disgraceful people -- honestly, that's the way they were catalogued.

Now here were these so-called church people who took Him to task for paying attention to them. And He very positively -- loudly and clearly -- He says, "It's as simple as all this -- a physician is meant for the sick."

...I wouldn't give two cents for a physician if he catered only to the well. I place a high value on preventative medicine, don't get me wrong. But when I am bloodied, and when I am bruised, and when my bones are broken, and when I'm emaciated with cancer -- I want a physician who will pay attention to me...

...and when my body is racked with disease and I'm far from being attractive -- that's when I need help....

And that's the way Jesus Christ reasoned. And there were those who never forgave Him . . . He didn't spend enough time with those on the inside, because He had a concern for those on the outside.

And now I say to you as earnestly as I can, I know a measure of anguish sometimes for all of us who are here -- it's so easy for us to spend our time and our energy holding one another's hands -- not that the church isn't meant to be a

support group -- God knows how much I need your help! But we're not meant simply to say nice things to one another, to allow ourselves to believe that we have it made! -- and then ignore those who are on the outside.

It's not easy to do it, maybe that's why we don't!

....it's not easy to identify with people who don't look the way we look...

....it's not easy to identify with people who don't smile the way we smile....

....it's not easy to identify with people who don't dress the way we dress, keep themselves groomed as well as you keep yourselves groomed...

....it's not easy to identify with people who are unattractive -- because they have been hurt....

Is any really sick person ever very attractive? I once knew a sick person so vain that she wouldn't allow people to come to see her when she was sick -- she knew how unattractive she really was.

I'm very honest with you -- I don't know that I could spend my energy going up to a bar and enduring the smell of the whole atmosphere that on occasion can nauseate me. I don't know that I could find it a very easy thing to stay with a person who has deliberately 'copped-out' and is running away from a situation when he doesn't have the courage to stay. I don't know that I'd have the patience to deal with people who don't know what it is to respond in a rational way, who lack the motivation to be what they ought to be -- honestly, I don't know that I could. I would be willing to try it if I thought that was God's directive.

And sometimes I find myself in that role with you, honestly I do. But one does it at some risk. Jesus did it at a risk that cost Him His life, because they said He became like them. They were quick to label Him: "He spends time with harlots -- then look what kind of a person He must be!"

I have forgotten the novelist who tells about the Roman Catholic cardinal who was seen coming out of a house of ill repute....and the people on the outside came to an ungodly conclusion....and the novelist says "For shame upon you -- what

you have done to my Cardinal! He wasn't that kind of person at all!"

Up in the hills of home we have a woman who works with certain people who are on the lower level of society, and every time she makes a house call she has to securely lock her car, and hide her pocketbook in the trunk. You identify at some risk with that type of person. But there they are. Our Blessed Lord was able to do it. He didn't condemn.....and He didn't condone.....and He didn't compromise. He never lost that ounce of integrity that became Him. And there were those here and there who responded, who would never have responded if He had not gone to them.

How do the outsiders become part of the inside? - - only when the insider goes to them where they are, accepts them where they are, and walks with them to where they ought to be. I say to you as earnestly as I can, sin is never attractive to God. Whether the sinner be on the outside or on the inside - - and there you and I need to take note. For all of us are sinners, even though we're on the inside of this place!

And what, may I ask, would cause you to believe that your sin is attractive to Jesus Christ? But He loves us as we are. Love has no meaning until it becomes that kind of love. I have given you repeatedly my definition for love: To love is to meet the need of the ones on the outside. They have needs too.

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(from sermon at 11:00 o'clock service)

Sin is never attractive . . . which prompts me to ask the question now concerning you and me: What now is there in the sight of God that's attractive about either one of us? But He loves us, and He's always coming our way singing God's love song.

I walk away from the sacred desk reminding you now of a true story told by Joseph Forte Newton in the early days of Tennessee. There was an out-post of white people who lived there. A band of Indians came, marauders, murdered practically everyone. But they took some of the boys from that post as prisoners....

...the years passed....the Indians were engaged in a skirmish, and



some of the Indians were taken prisoner, among them some young men whose skin was fairly light -- not quite like all the Indians...  
...there were mothers who remembered how their boys had been taken, and they thought to themselves, perchance my boy could be one of these young men.

The commander who had taken them prisoners invited the mothers to come. The mothers came. They walked up and down the row of prisoners....there was no response at all.

Then the commander of the post said, "Think for a minute -- when you held them in your arms, when they were as children -- did you ever sing a lullaby to them?" And one of the mothers then went up and down the line singing a lullaby of years gone by....and immediately there was a response here, there was a response there.....

It's a parable, I tell you -- Jesus Christ is God come to us singing the lullaby of love, that we who are in a destitute situation might be drawn to Him. This I most certainly believe.

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(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

Sermon - Pastor Raymond Shaheen  
The Fourth Sunday in Lent

March 29, 1981

Sermon Series: JESUS THE MAN: WHO HE WAS AND  
WHAT HE DID  
"JESUS: WHO PERFORMED MIRACLES"

QUIET our minds, hush our hearts, O  
God, and by thy Holy Spirit make us  
ready to give some measure of un-  
divided attention to the preaching  
of your Word; in the name of Jesus  
Christ, thy Son our Lord, who when  
He came, came preaching. Amen.

Today's sermon is another in the series being preached from the Saint Luke pulpit this Lenten season on the general theme of JESUS THE MAN: WHO HE WAS AND WHAT HE DID. Today's sermon bears the title, "JESUS: THE MAN WHO PERFORMED MIRACLES." And if it's a text you'll be needing, there are any number of them that could be chosen. This one could suffice, the 43rd verse of the 9th chapter of the Gospel according to Luke:

"And they were all amazed at the mighty power  
of God."

Tell me, when you think of someone you've known, what do you quickly recall about that person, particularly as he's lived his earthly pilgrimage to its conclusion? In all likelihood when you think of someone who has made an impression upon you, you may think of the things that he did that were extraordinary. We're like that---the first things that come to mind when we think about a person are the things that left a more-than-usual impression upon us. The person need not have been a genius. The very fact that he did ordinary things extraordinarily well is enough to make us remember that person . . .

-- that neighbor who went out of his way to show a kindness,  
not just once, but repeatedly, so that it became his life-  
style --

That's what you remember about that person! -- a very ordinary thing done extraordinarily well, and you do not easily forget it, who he was, and where he lived.

So it is when you and I think about Jesus Christ. We read what's written in the Good Book, we're impressed by His life, and most of us level off as does the Sunday School youngster, in first thinking about Jesus and the extraordinary things

that He did. He performed miracles -- almost any youngster in Sunday School begins at that point in thinking in terms of Jesus Christ. As he matures and becomes a bit older, we may even take this as the Scriptures record it, "He went about doing good..." day in and day out being the kind person, the decent person, the compassionate person, the considerate person -- and doing it extraordinarily well. And perhaps if we don't make much of the feeding of the five thousand, giving sight to a blind man, causing a lame person to walk, or bringing a dead man back to life -- we may zero in very easily and quickly upon the fact that no matter where He went, given any condition or circumstance, He was kind, He was compassionate, He was loving -- doing ordinary things extraordinarily well.

It's interesting, however, that in the day of Jesus there were many people who believed on Him because they saw the signs and the wonders that He did. Not so today. I'm not sure that there are many people, who, if there were something extraordinary to happen, unless they have a particular religious orientation, will associate it with God. In the day of Jesus, however, the climate was entirely different. No matter what happened, for the people who lived at the time of Jesus, anything out of the ordinary, God was either praised or blamed, lauded or taken to task. That's the way it was! They did not deal in secondary causes. They did not deal in secondary forces or factors. It was "Allah" . . . "Allah" . . . "Allah" -- the Arabic word for God, that first came to their lips.

As many of you know, I came out of a home where Middle-Eastern influence continued throughout the formative years of my life. And my mother, of blessed memory, I can remember going with her when we would feed the chickens -- we kept some of them in our back yard....(you could do that kind of thing in a small town years ago)....and even when we would go to feed those chickens . . . .

-- if anybody knows anything at all about feeding chickens, you remember how a chicken eats -- it lowers its head, it eats something, then raises its head and its throat, backward -- ...and all the time that was happening, with that chicken's neck being raised, as my mother said, "heavenward -- skyward" -- "Raymond, look! Even the chicken is thanking God for what it has to eat!" That was the mentality that comes out of the Middle East that continues in some places even to this day, where the God-oriented home never keep God out of the picture.

So in the day of Jesus. Whenever He did anything -- and especially the extraordinary -- they said "God!" And if the extraordinary didn't happen, and that was

their only hope, they went storming heaven's gates, or they railed against heaven for lack of a miracle. When you think of Jesus Christ as a man who lived here on earth, you may think of Him as the man who performed miracles. But be careful when you do so that you don't run the risk of that group of people who stood at the foot of the Cross and taunted Him because He didn't perform miracles: "If thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross and we will believe you!" . . . and if you don't perform a miracle, we won't believe you."

Now in the light of that, what can I say to you as I come to this sacred desk this morning to talk to you and to give to you, perhaps, what I am pleased to refer to as a wholesome, healthy perspective on Jesus Christ, the miracle-worker? I'm constrained to tell you, as well I should at the very beginning, that He was an extraordinary person, and extraordinary people have been known to do extraordinary things. I'm indebted to a writer who has seeded my mind with that concept, He is extraordinary. Extraordinary people are classified as extraordinary because they do extraordinary things . . . .

-- Mozart wrote a concerto when he was only five years of age.

Most people do not do that sort of thing. Mozart was extraordinary....

-- St. Francis could preach to the birds, and hold their attention.

Practically every preacher that I know can't do that -- it's enough to hold the attention of people such as you!

-- Dr. Trudeau, a victim of tuberculosis, went to the Adirondacks to die. He found in that place a cure for the disease by which he was afflicted. Most people had gone there to die. Trudeau was an extraordinary person. In the face of his affliction, he found a cure.

It's also to be said that the more extraordinary things that a person can do, the more people are inclined to exaggerate the extraordinary. And that's a thing that must be said, necessarily so. Even Mahatma Gandhi in his day had to take people to task for the things that they attributed to him that just were not so. But they were swept off their feet with the accolades that they were so quick to give to their leader.

You ought to know, and I think this needs to be said repeatedly, that for the most part the extraordinary things that Jesus did, as they are reported in the Gos-

pels, were also done at one time or another by other people -- both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament....

-- Joshua commanded the sun to stand still....

-- Elijah multiplied food, even as Jesus fed the five thousand....

-- Elijah raised a boy from the dead.....

-- Peter and John healed a lame man....

Jesus was not the only person to perform miracles. But perform miracles He did. Now what are we to say about that?

Well, He never performed miracles just because people dictated a miracle-of-the-day. He never went through the hoops at our command. We need to remember that.

Secondly, when He performed miracles He never performed them just because He wanted to fascinate us. He was no magician. Would you believe it, one night Pastor David and I did have a free evening in Madras when we were on that special assignment in India, and what do you suppose we did? As long as I can remember, David has always been fascinated by magicians, and we found out in Madras that night there was a magician putting on a show. So off we went, the two of us.

The place was packed, and bless his soul, out of consideration for me, he bought us two tickets -- right down front -- we could almost touch the magician. And I must tell you, he was fairly awe-struck. There were things done on that stage that I could not possibly explain or understand. That hand was so quick, and I suppose if I had my way I could have said to that magician, "Would you mind going through that again -- I didn't quite catch it the first time." Why do I tell you this? That magician had only one thing in mind: to make an impression upon me and all the other people who were there, to fascinate us, to prove to us how clever he was. When Jesus Christ performed miracles He was no magician. He never performed a miracle just because he wanted to impress people or give them a display of power.

Why did Jesus perform miracles? Because He was the personification of love, and wherever He went, if there were needs that had to be met and an extraordinary gesture in the name of God had to be exercised, His love was strong enough to see that that need would be met. Whenever Jesus performed a miracle it was never done in order to impress people with a display of power. It was done because He loved people. Do I have to tell you, is your experience so limited that you can't understand that the most dynamic force in the world is the power of love, and wherever love is, "miracles" are always bound to happen! In a certain sense, miracles remain mystery. In a certain sense, love remains mystery.

When I think of the love of my parents for me, when I think of the loving of people who have influenced my life, who went out of their way to keep me from stumbling, just because they loved me -- a love that I could not earn, a love that I did not deserve. It's left its mark upon the fabric of my soul, and who among you cannot say the same thing?

God is love, and His eternal reservoir is waiting to be tapped -- whenever your love and my love is strong enough to turn in that direction and allow the force of love to be released in this world. That's why I remember Jesus as the miracle-worker, not because of what He did, but because of why He did it. And that's something to think about.

(from 11:00 sermon)

. . . and miracle after miracle happens in Saint Luke Church, when I see people in an unhibited way, just doing things out of pure love; and when I see selfishness rule, and people permit their acts to be dictated by selfishness, I see blessings withheld. But when love is let free, and the needs of other people have the priority - - wonderful things always begin to happen. This I most certainly believe.

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(transcribed as recorded)

Sermon - Pastor Raymond Shaheen  
 The Fifth Sunday in Lent

April 5, 1981

Sermon Series: JESUS THE MAN: WHO HE WAS AND  
 WHAT HE DID

"JESUS: THE MAN WHO DIED"

GRACE, Mercy and peace from God  
 the Father and from His Son Jesus  
 Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

This is the next-to-the-last sermon in the series being preached at this time of the year from the Saint Luke pulpit on the general theme of: JESUS THE MAN: WHO HE WAS AND WHAT HE DID. Today's sermon bears the title, "JESUS: THE MAN WHO DIED." The text is the 31st verse of the 27th chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew, and needs to be read very, very carefully:

"When they had mocked him, they took off the robe from him, put his own clothes on him, and led him away to crucify him . . ."

That's how He came to die - - they put him to death.

On more than one occasion I have been numbered among those who have been privileged to stand presumably very close to the spot where it happened. In company with any number of you who have had that experience, I have been deeply moved. And as I've gone away I've reflected upon what it was that happened there.

First, I begin with the point that it happened two thousand years ago. I don't know of any other place in the world to which I would go simply to mark an event that happened two thousand years ago - - I don't easily remember things that happened so long ago. Very, very few things happen in this world that leave such a mark on the fabric of history.

-- Do you remember anything extraordinary that happened six weeks ago?

-- Can you think of anything that may have happened this morning already, that two thousand years from now people might look back and say, "Ah, yes, that's when it happened -- April 5, 1981!"

In a world where so many things happen, happen so quickly, how few that are extraordinary, that we have a way of remembering for two thousand years! I begin at that point - - strange that I should be drawn to a place to remember something that happened two thousand years ago, that of necessity I cannot allow myself to forget.

And then I also reflect upon the fact that what it was that happened there -- He was only 33 years of age. For the greater part of His life He was a carpenter's apprentice, and then presumably helped with the carpenter business, according to legend, after His father, the proprietor, died, and He carried on the family business.

Then He became, of all things, a wandering preacher who went from place to place --  
-- without funds, without any financial backing, without any  
kind of organization behind Him, without any highly-structured  
program - - -

...an itinerant, who went here and there -- only 33 years of age.

And then of necessity I recall the fact that it all happened in an area perhaps not as large as the entire state of Vermont, and that He wasn't known very well, if at all, outside of the community where He lived.

-- and I also recognize the fact that in His lifetime, as He concluded His ministry, people for the most part discredited Him....

Now you and I, in company with Christendom, at this time of the year look back and remember this man. And the one thing that we can't possibly forget about Him is that He died, and He died the kind of death that He did. It is a tremendous thing, absolutely tremendous.

*character - the Comm. How He died -*

Why do we remember? Of course, because He was who He was and because He died the way He did. But I warn you with all the strength that I can command, don't settle easily for referring to the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ. Think of the sacrificial life and death of Jesus Christ. We remember Him as a man who died because dying became Him. He died the way He lived.

And in a certain sense, there dying upon that cross, He symbolized in one grand and glorious chapter in His life His entire life-span -- this is the ultimate -- may I make bold to suggest to you, the grandest and most wonderful moment in the history of man. That's a daring thing to say. Can you name anything that's more wonderful than that? The actual demonstration of God personified in the human being revealed to us how much He loves us. Is there anything more wonderful than the demonstration of love -- when love does what love is meant to do! -- perfectly and completely.

We remember His dying because He's the one who can say as none other has ever been able to say, "It's finished - - it's completed! . . . and into Your hands I commend my spirit."



Prepare yourself for this thought, my friend. Most of us are going to come to the end of life with any amount of unfinished business. All the noble dreams that we have had, a good percentage of them will never, never be realized. And unfortunately, so stained are we by human sin that we have a way of procrastinating and saying, "Next year . . . or in a more favorable situation, I will do these things."

" -- when the climate for loving is conducive to loving, then I will be loving -- but in the meantime I don't have to be loving."

" -- only when people make it easy for me to be good will I become good, and I'll wait for that optimum situation . . . "

Honestly now, wittingly or unwittingly, we have a way of subscribing to that kind of notion. But not so this man! Dying became Him, because in that moment of death we have captured the meaning of His entire life.

I'm thrilled as I read these words, I hope you may be thrilled likewise. I wish I could have said them, I wish I could have written them, because they constitute a sentiment that I believe and about which I feel very strongly --

" . . . there are the high moments in human history when the mute is taken away, and the strengths of the spirit soar to incredible heights, when men are at their best, and are sometimes better than you can ever believe them to have been. When such things happen, God comes very close to us."

Some of us have a desire to go on living because we know that this is a possibility. We have seen people rise above their baser self, we have seen those exceedingly precious moments when the very best begins to shine through, and there it is -- no matter how fleeting the glimpse may be.

Now if you and I can say that about a human being, I'm bringing to your attention now that we can say this about a man of whom it could always be said! He was never less than God, and His whole life was lived sacrificially . . . and that's why we remember the way He died.

When Dr. Stackel stands in this pulpit on Good Friday, I dare say you'll experience great preaching. To begin with, there is no preaching in the entire Church Year like the preaching that comes from the sacred desk on Good Friday as we meditate upon those Seven Words. For more than a half-century I myself have had my mind and my spirit captured as I've listened to people preach -- or if you permit me to say it, when several times in the course of those years I myself have been used by God to echo those words. And I remember the first Word from the Cross -- prepare yourself now when Dr. Stackel will deal with it: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Here is a man who is dying -- this is the manner of His death, that He should concern Himself with forgiveness for other people. That's why we remember Him! That's the way He lived -- constantly thinking in terms of other people. His death was no exception. This is the grand expression, indicating something that had always been there. Let me say it to you as earnestly as I can: Get rid of this notion that only later on will you become the character that you were meant to be. You and I are born without a character, but as we live out the days of our years we develop that character and in the moment of death it's Exhibit A -- we either are, or we aren't. Death doesn't have a way of creating it -- the culmination simply reveals it.

I don't know who pictured Judgment in this way, but you can't ignore it. Said a man, as he thought in terms of Judgment, "That awesome moment when I will have completed my earthly pilgrimage, and in this exceedingly ultimate moment of life, as I breathe my last, God will make plain to me what it was that I had done with the time He gave me here on earth."

You know that, of course you do, because you and I have a way of responding to people when they die -- when they die, if you have been at all near and dear to them, in a very extraordinary way the meaning of their entire life suddenly comes into focus. Just as the man who died, not somehow, but triumphantly, because He lived triumphantly, He was able not to think of Himself, but to think of other people. That's why we remember Him.

Most of us, and I want this sermon to be as helpful as I can, and let it be as personal as I can, most of us are crippled in life, never quite doing as much good as we ought to do because we're so self-conscious, which is another way of saying we're always thinking about ourselves and what's going to happen to us. Jesus Christ, racked in pain, dying upon the cross, does not think about Himself. And He refuses to allow Himself to believe that what those soldiers were doing they were doing to Him. He thought of them and their despicable deed apart from Himself. He did not focus upon Himself and Himself alone. He lived that way.

How much hell you and I create for ourselves and how much misery we create for other people when something happens, and the only thing we can think about is our hurt feelings. We are heard saying, "How can they do this to me?" -- "How can I allow myself to be injured by the way this thing is happening?" As long as you want to go through life thinking of yourself first, you'll never have a bit of heaven on earth, you'll have plenty of hell. Jesus gave us a glimpse of heaven for the simple reason He was always thinking in terms of other people and not what it would mean to Him or

how it would advance His own cause.

I am thrilled when I read -- I am numbered among those who remember George Arliss as a marvelous actor on the stage -- George Arliss. He had this thing happen to him that's bound to happen to anybody who sticks around for any length of time. In a dramatic production in which a young star also participated. The drama critics the next day gave George Arliss secondary consideration, and paid attention to the young star. What did George Arliss do -- allow himself to go off in a corner and say, "How can they do this to me?" . . . did he sit there and selfishly pout? He did a perfectly magnificent thing -- which became George Arliss, who was committed to the theater....

...he was delighted to see that life could produce someone promising, that perchance after he had run his course the stage would still have somebody else, and he called the young star to his dressing room and said, "I too want to congratulate you. Yours was a magnificent performance, and I would wish for you a future that's rich in promise."

It takes a big man to do that, but only a person who thinks first of the work and not of himself.

This truth needs to be applied to all of us in our inter-personal relationships. In the intimate relationship of a father and a mother with their children, in the intimate personal relationship of a man with his wife, the wife with her husband. You think first of your marriage, and then of your partner in that marriage. You always set yourself a goal over and above yourself! God has given me the good fortune to be a parish administrator. I work with a staff. And I discover again and again and again how effective their work is when they place their loyalty where it belongs: their commitment to Jesus Christ. And when any one of them starts concentrating on an incidental thing and gets his priorities messed up, we can cause ourselves a lot of grief.

When people come to me for counseling -- I long ago settled for this thing, when I see the strife and the tension that can prevail between two people who were meant to have a good relationship. Sure, sure you can win an argument, but you could lose your marriage. And what happens usually when we try to win an argument? -- hell-bent or otherwise, we try to see that our point of view prevails, right or wrong. Not so Jesus Christ. He did not consistently concern Himself with how many recruits He got or how many recruits He didn't get. He was not forever in competition with John the Baptist. He knew only one measure of content: to do His Father's will in the place

where He happened to be at the time that He was there. And when He came to die, the moment of death was no exception. His whole life had been the kind of thing: "I must be about my Father's business." . . . wherever He was.

Now you may say to yourself quickly: What good did it do? Honestly, ask yourself the question: What good did it do? Nobody at the foot of the cross applauded Him. He didn't change the mind of Pontius Pilate....He didn't convert Caiaphas the high priest. You say what good did it do? Well, you and I have lived long enough to know that there comes a time when a person has to do what has to be done just because it's the right thing. And for the Christian the right thing is always endeavoring to do the thing that's pleasing in the sight of his heavenly Father, and let the matter rest. And then, happily, this note needs to be struck --- no good that's ever done in God's name is completely lost -- later on, we attest to the fact that goodness always bears its fruit, in its own way, at one time or another.

I should remind you that the first performance of Bach's "Saint Matthew's Passion" was on April 25, 1729. Some years ago when it was performed, an annotator wrote, "Unnoticed when first performed, unknown last year, until Mendelssohn performed it later in Berlin," . . . and then people began to pay attention to a work as wonderful as that. Some of us want to go on living because at a particular moment in history we got a glimpse of a life as wonderful as that -- who died the way He lived -- triumphantly. This I most certainly believe.

\* \* \*

(transcribed as recorded)

"O'ER HILL AND DALE"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God our  
Father and from His Son Jesus Christ,  
our Blessed Lord. Amen.

Jesus was a great story teller. That's one reason why people came and listened to Him gladly. For when He spoke, He spoke so frequently in a way that they couldn't possibly misunderstand what it was He was trying to say.

The stories that He told are reverently referred to as Parables. And the sermons for the greater part to be preached from the Saint Luke pulpit from September last year until June of this year are based upon some of the parables that He spoke. For our consideration today, what is sometimes referred to as the first story that He told, and in the minds of any number of people, one of the most popular of His parables. It's recorded in three Gospels -- Matthew, Mark, Luke. Hear it now as it's recorded in the 13th chapter of Matthew:

"The same day went Jesus out of the house, and sat by the sea side.

And great multitudes were gathered together unto him, so that he went into a ship, and sat; and the whole multitude stood on the shore.

And he spake many things unto them in parables, saying, Behold, a sower went forth to sow;

And when he sowed, some seeds fell by the wayside, and the fowls came and devoured them up:

Some fell upon stony places, where they had not much earth: and forthwith they sprung up, because they had no deepness of earth:

And when the sun was up, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away.

And some fell among thorns; and the thorns sprung up, and choked them:

But other fell into good ground, and brought forth fruit, some a hundredfold, some sixtyfold, some thirtyfold.

Who hath ears to hear, let him hear. . . . "

....as much as to say when He concluded that story -- "Now that I've told you the story, make sure you get the point." He had a point in mind, of course He did. And you need to understand what it was.

But before I tell you what it was, I need to pose a question in your presence: What do you suppose is the preacher's problem as he anticipates going to a sacred desk such as this one? He has a problem in trying to find enough time to earnestly give heed to the study of the Scriptures -- for when a man is ordained a minister of the Word and Sacraments in the Lutheran Church, he promises to preach faithfully according to the Scriptures. And if he's to preach faithfully, then he has to study the Scriptures diligently. Well that's a problem, to find enough time.

But aside from that, for this preacher at least, it remains a real problem to be able to interpret the timeless truth in a relevant way. It isn't enough to preach from the Scriptures, but to be able to take a passage from the Scriptures and make it applicable to your need and your condition -- that's something else.

Sometimes I come here to Saint Luke Church on a Saturday night, when it's empty. And by deliberate design I sit perhaps where you now sit, or where you're seated. And then I try to visualize as best I can who the person may be who might be seated there at 8:30....9:30.....or 11:00.....or at 5:00 o'clock, and try to visualize the path that that person has taken to the divine hour of worship.

I do it on good authority, because Harry Emerson Fosdick, a well-known professor of Homiletics a number of years ago in Union Theological Seminary in New York, used to say to his students: "Remember every time you stand in the pulpit to preach, and you face the congregation, every person in front of you invari-

ably is a person with a problem, and do your best to make God's Word relevant to that person."

....or this morning I came very early, and sat where some of you now sit, hoping and praying that as this sermon is being preached -- to use a good Quaker expression -- it might "speak to your condition" . . .

When Pastor David and I were in India on special assignment, one evening some folks gathered together in Madras and had a dinner party in our honor. One of the persons who happened to be present was the son of a preacher, himself a pastor, but his father was a minister. And in the course of the conversation he said something very salient -- he said, "I'm going to say to you, Pastor," -- looking at both of us -- "what I once told my father. You're sometimes at a marked disadvantage because usually when you see people you see them in church, in a very limited sort of way. You could serve them more effectively if you could be with them during the week and identify yourself with the conditions where they work and where they labor, and where they wrestle with the problems of life."

Pastor David was not overly moved by what the man said, except to find comfort, because on a number of different occasions Pastor David has told me of a notion that he has -- which I'd be very happy if others could support -- and that is when a person decides to study for the ministry, he might not go directly from college, but he'd be required to spend two years in industry, or in business, relating to the issues and the problems of people who work for a living....or, perhaps if that can't be done, then while he's a student in seminary he would be gainfully employed somewhere -- after hours or during the summer vacation period.

You're aware of the fact, aren't you, that Jesus Christ didn't preach His first sermon until He was 30 years of age....and all that time that was spent in the carpenter shop, as He related to people, as He discovered the nuances and the subtleties of the every-day life and the dynamics of interpersonal behavior. He was preparing Himself for His preaching ministry. It is no small thing to be able

to take the timeless truth of Scripture and make it relevant.

Why do I spend all of this time? -- let me tell you very quickly. Jesus was a master at this. He realized where His people happened to be at this particular time when He spoke this specific parable, and He related timeless truth to their condition. Now what was their situation?

There had been a turn in events. For a while in the ministry of Jesus things went along swimmingly. He had a good hearing, and people responded with support and enthusiasm. But now the tide was turning. The Herodians and the Pharisees, as an example, were ganging up on Him in an unholy alliance. They were out to do Him in as soon as they could. And sometimes when He preached there were people who questioned what He was saying -- and always now there were those who questioned His methods. And even some of His own family began to have misgivings as to what the future would hold for Jesus Christ. This had crept over into the mind of the disciples, and He was fully aware of it.

He did not have to wait for a committee to come to Him and say, "Jesus, we have been surveying the situation, we've been doing some research, and we've discovered that things are not going along as well as we had hoped that they would -- in fact the future does not augur very well for you and your ministry, and we're in duty bound to tell you!" -- He didn't have to have somebody come and tell Him that. He could hear their rumblings, He could sense their demeanor, His antenna was up.

Realizing their situation now, He felt in duty bound to speak with relevance a timeless truth that would introduce and bring to bear upon their problem a basic nature and character of God.

I never cease to marvel at the way He could do things, even as I read it at this distance -- He was a master at it. And when I study the whole business of the parables I have been led to believe that every parable that He spoke, He spoke on the spur of the moment.

I know some preachers -- and I don't fault them for it -- who spend any



amount of energy, trying to polish up every single phrase -- writing and re-writing one sentence after another, one paragraph after another. Some preachers even come to church on a Saturday night and practice their sermon -- I'm not faulting them! Anything that might help, anything that could carry a measure of improvement is in order. But not so Jesus Christ! With that element of spontaneity and freshness, He was able to speak the timeless truth with relevance.

As an example now, in this situation: sensing their fear as to how the future was going to go, suffering a measure of despair and discouragement, He said, "Look -- yonder!" They could all see it -- it is a sower with that, you might call it a gunny-sack, a burlap bag, slung over his shoulder and he's reaching into it, getting a handful of seed....and as he walks he scatters the seed....

....and Jesus said, "Now watch him!" They had no idea why He was doing this, or what point He wanted to make -- spontaneously, as He listens to their grumbling....

He said, "Now look at that man, he's sowing seed -- look where some of it's going to fall -- you can see for yourself -- that ~~path~~ beaten path!"

Anybody who's been in Palestine visually remembers now how that beaten path, almost as hard as concrete, baked by the sun.....Jesus said, "Some of the seed is falling there. Does that seem to bother the sower? Does he go and pick it up? Does he shy away from an area such as that? -- not at all! Look! -- look how he's going! Some of that seed is going to fall where there's only a very thin layer of soil -- almost like a quarter of an inch of dust on that limestone ledge -- "

....you people who have been there, you can see it right now....

".. Look! -- some of the seed is falling there! Will he shy away from that? It won't even have a chance to grow! When the sun comes out, why that limestone ledge will become like a bake-oven! The seed will be scorched! But look at him -- he's still going on sowing his seed!

....and some of that seed is going to fall where there are thorns

growing, the thistles, it will be choked out -- won't have a chance.....but look at him," says Jesus, "He's sowing his seed just the same....."

Master that He was, I presume He could have stopped and said, "I know what you have been thinking, there's not much of a promise of a future, and I think you have a point." Marvelous! Notice how He applied His psychology. He did not criticize them for thinking. It's always a salutary thing when any person begins to think and to respond to something. They may not think through to a conclusion . . . so Jesus says, "I can understand, there is reason for people to be discouraged. This farmer -- look what he's doing, how much of his seed is going to be lost! But I'm happy to tell you," says Jesus -- "Now watch him--over there's a patch -- not very large -- he's going to sow seed there. And when he sows that seed, he may get 30% -- he may get 60% -- he may get 100-fold!"

....anybody who's studied the situation in Palestine for the most part may say 10-fold is a good return. But, says Jesus, in this case there is a good possibility it will give 30 - 60 - 100....and that's exactly why the sower goes on sowing.

And if Jesus Christ had appulprit like this I can see Him leaning over it and earnestly and tenderly saying to His people, "Now do you get the point?" We must always make allowances for the fact that there could be a positive return.

I suppose Winifred could preach this sermon far better than I, good farmer's daughter that she is. Every now and then we talk about what it was like when she lived on the farm and her father tilled the fields and sowed the seed and gathered the grain. We still find it a helpful thing when we head for the hills of home, we're sustained from Winifred's sister's garden....her husband Karl will tell us every now and then, when we sit down and thoroughly enjoy the new peas, the new potatoes, the garden fresh lettuce....the corn on the cob that we eat perhaps 15 minutes from when it was plucked from the field.....and then Karl every now and then will tell us the hazards that had to be taken and the risk

that had to be run. One always had to deal with the possibility of an early frost, or a late frost, as the case may be....one always has to deal with the contention with the rabbits and the deer, the insects, and every now and then the driving rain that would wash away all of the seed and it never had a chance to germinate. Well, that's been the story for Karl, year in and year out. There is always a risk involved, as any farmer knows. Karl's in his 70's -- he's going to have a garden again this year, and as long as God gives him strength, again and again and again, because there is always the possibility that there will be a harvest.

Now, Jesus tells this story that we might remember the undiscourageable nature of the farmer. And He says, God's like that. Despite the possibility that we may lose so much -- and we need to remember that -- the other possibility remains that there will be a return. This is a linerick that God did not write:

God's world made a perfect beginning;  
Man spoiled the creation by sinning;  
We know that the story  
Will end in God's glory,  
But at the present time the other side's winning.

Again and ever so often you and I come to that conclusion. And I have been known to say to you, and I confess it with much shame, that there are times when I think we're inching toward Hell faster than we are inching toward Heaven. But no one who claims the love of Jesus Christ has a right to think or speak like that. The undiscourageable nature of God remains. With Him, He sows in all places and beside all waters, that there might be the promise of a harvest.

There was a preacher who was found in a congregation lamenting the fact that year in and year out he did not have a single person confess faith in Jesus Christ. But he said, I will not give up. He stayed in that parish, and continued to preach for the conversion of souls. When his ministry was completed -- this may seem strange for you to believe -- when his ministry was completed he only had one soul to his credit -- Robert Moffitt -- the missionary, the <sup>little</sup> translator. God's word to you and God's word to me is this: Don't give up! Isn't it comforting to know that God maintains this basic philosophy, even when He thinks of you, and when He thinks of me. And that's a happy thought!

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"NOW ABOUT FORGIVENESS"  
(Matthew 18:21-35)

GRACE, Mercy and peace from God our  
Father and from His Son Jesus Christ,  
our Blessed Lord. Amen.

I have yet to do it -- I have been tempted to do it on occasion -- to keep a journal of the way I have been greeted on a Sunday morning when I come to this place. Occasionally there are those, not very often, however, who will say, as they ask the question, "What's the good word for the day?" -- at least that would indicate that they were anticipating hearing a sermon, and perhaps it could speak to their need. Every now and then, not too often, somebody asks that question.

This morning I got the prize question: "What did you buy at the Garage Sale?" It was a spectacular, of course. It's been advertised as the Greatest Garage Sale in the Entire Area.....and the weather was wellnigh perfect, and people came in crowds from the very beginning, even before the gates were open.... and they were mingling around afterward until the last stand had been closed for the day.

I saw a number of things, of course, that I would never think of buying. But people did. I was surprised -- one of the first things to be sold was a riding lawn mower -- it went off the lot on its own power. I'm sorry I wasn't there when they sold the sail boat.

There's one thing, however, that I'm surprised did not sell, and because it didn't sell somebody gave it to me. And that I appreciate.

....it's made out of spikes, in railroad bed construction, a very, very heavy spike, and then the spike's not nearly as heavy, to fashion a cross. . . . really now, I would have thought that that would have taken somebody's eye, particularly if they would have known the history that's behind it. ....

It was made in a hobby shop that was owned and operated by an octogenarian retired preacher, who perhaps with all the energy that God gave him in his retirement years, still wanted to put in front of people the greatest symbol of the Christian faith -- the cross.

Well, I'm charitable, you know that I am. Maybe people just don't much think about crosses when they go to garage sales....it may be the last thing that's on their mind. And maybe a lot of people who come to garage sales aren't Christian at all! Let's be very fair with ourselves, and with them as well -- they may not pretend to be what they aren't.

I asked myself the question: What did people think when they saw it, if they saw it at all? Forget for the moment that it wasn't sold -- what did they think? Did they really think when they saw it, or as you see the cross here in Saint Luke Sunday by Sunday -- that that is the symbol of the Christian experience, the symbol of God's great love.

When your Associate Pastor, while still a seminarian, stood at this sacred desk to preach for the very first time -- he began his sermon with these words, that as long as God gives me memory I'll want to recall: "I suppose," said he, "the three greatest words in the English language are: 'I forgive you.'" I thought for the moment when he began that he'd say "I love you." But he outran me, as so often he does. The three greatest words are not "I love you" -- but -- "I forgive you." For forgiveness is the highest form of love.....

... "God so loved the world that He gave His only  
begotten son, that whoever believes in Him should  
not perish . . . "

God wants to wipe the slate clean. God wants always to show Himself kindly disposed and gracious. God wants always to show his highest kind of love, which is forgiveness.

Because it is central in the Christian experience we ought to think about it more often than we do. How often in the course of the day do you permit your-

self to think -- 'I must be as a forgiving person' -- with whatever opportunities may come my way this day, whatever happens, I must be by nature a forgiving person.'

They tell me there's a church yard or a graveyard outside New York City where the most interesting of all epitaphs appears on a tombstone, as far as I'm concerned -- just one word: no name, no date, nothing....one word: FORGIVEN.

It raises all kinds of questions, sure!

...man or woman?

...son or daughter?

...husband or wife?

...and what was the nature of the sin? -- that this person, so intent on living and on dying should think: "Let me be remembered for all time as one who is forgiven."

By whom? By himself or herself? You know, it's no small thing to establish that place in life where you can deal charitably with yourself. Some of us find it a difficult thing to do. Some of us go through life forever crippled because we never learned how to forgive ourselves. Forgiven by God? Hopefully -- the thing we need most. Forgiven by one of God's children? -- and that is another precious story.

I can't believe that you don't much think about forgiveness in the course of the day. Honestly I can't. Either the need of it, or the lack of it. For every single one of us at one time or another has been wronged. Sure you have. And some of you on occasion have come to me because you can't quite deal with the fact that somebody has done you in. It did happen. And you didn't deserve it. And it's like a cancer in your heart, it continues to eat away. You have been wronged.

And some of you with the same degree of intensity have come to me because you know that you've wronged others, and seemingly irreparable damage has been

done by either a feckless or a reckless thing on your part, in some weak moment of indiscretion, perhaps, and you'll never have done with the fact, whether they know it or not, they have been wronged.

...and then there are those of us who morning, noon or  
night have our moments when we say, "God, have mercy....have  
mercy....have mercy....have mercy....have mercy....have  
mercy....have mercy....."

So I wonder how people could have passed this cross yesterday, since we ought to think about forgiveness as much as we should. . . . or how you can even come to this place sometimes.

I don't fault you for it because you don't do it, but I naturally and instinctively bow my head when the cross passes by me in procession. I try to keep myself sensitive to all that it represents. And how for the life of me any of you could ever come to this place and walk away without receiving a blessing, no matter what you may or may not get from the sermon, the music or anything else -- if in this place, with this cross in front of you, you don't go away with something meant to hold you in good stead in the face of a demanding and an exacting week, the cross that stands as the eternal symbol of God's forgiving love.

Now let me say very quickly several things about forgiveness that you need to hear. To begin with, it was God's idea. God initiated this whole concept of forgiveness. Long before you and I knew that we would ever be in need of it, God set it in motion. He thought up Jesus Christ. He thought up this business of being forever graciously inclined, graciously disposed toward us. He is by nature the one who says, I will not wait for you to become penitent, I will not wait for you to become remorseful. There is that sublime verse in Scripture that goes like this: "While we were yet sinners, God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself." God doesn't wait for us to become good before He forgives

us. It's even when we're at our worst that God shows His forgiving nature. How contrary to your practice and mine.....

-- let him show himself sorrowful!

-- let him come to me crawling on his knees!

-- let him indicate in every way how really sorry he is .....

then I may consider forgiving him. Let me have some evidence of his willingness to make payment! -- to balance the books! -- to get rid of the harm that's been done. Then I will show to him my friendly face, then I will reveal my forgiving nature . . . . that's the way you and I talk.

But are you aware of it, that you can't substantiate this kind of a stance in Scripture? When it comes to forgiveness, God takes the initiative. In fact I think it can be said that God gives in order that we might repent! -- that we might be moved to respond to His love and then become what we ought to become.

Hanging there on the cross -- remember, that eternal symbol, without anybody asking for it, Jesus Christ says, "Father -- forgive them...."

...."They don't have sense to ask for it -- they

don't know what they're doing -- forgive them."

It's God's idea. He's as wonderful as that!

The second thing I need to tell you is when God forgives He forgives completely. That's it! "I'll remember your sins no more." Why can't we remember that when we deal with people who ask to be forgiven? Didn't I tell you about 20 years ago, about that woman of the streets, a modern-day Mary of Magdala, who repented of her sins in that small town and came beautifully under the influence of the grace of Jesus Christ. And where did she want to be then? -- within a company of believers. And the very first Sunday she showed up at church she got the cold shoulder -- so much so that she would exclaim to the preacher, "Isn't there any place in town where a sinner who knows she's being redeemed can be made to feel at home?"

God says, "I will remember your sins no more." But you and I can't be like



God, can we? We hold it against them, even to the very day that they die, and the day that we die. And it continues to be like a cancer.

Many a physician has said to the person come seeking medical help, either in words that come out like these or words that mean much the same -- "I can't do much for you. You need the confessional booth."

Another thing that needs to be said about forgiveness is, even though it's complete as far as God's concerned, it is conditioned. Sounds strange, doesn't it? How can anything complete be conditioned? Where God is concerned, it's complete. But as far as we're concerned its becoming effective is conditional upon our willingness to become a forgiving person. Until I show myself as a forgiving person, the forgiveness of God is no longer operative in my soul.

That should not be news to you. Every time you pray the Lord's Prayer you spell that out -- "Forgive us . . . as we forgive" -- only as I show myself by nature a forgiving person is the forgiveness of God made effective in my life. Ah, you see, there are deep thoughts concerning this whole business of forgiveness. Anything that's great and wonderful requires of me deep thought. And yet you and I treat it so casually.

I once read about a man, the journey of a pilgrim, who every single thinking moment of the day prayed simply: "Lord, have mercy!....Lord, have mercy!....

Lord, have mercy!.....Lord, have mercy!....Lord, have mercy!..... It was said of Catherine the Queen, by a Britisher, "Unforgiving she lived; unforgiving she died." The most gracious person that I've ever met on the face of this earth is a person who is fully aware of the fact that God had forgiven her her every sin and she went through life dealing with charity as she met other people. One leads to the other! It's as simple as all that. And as wonderful.

The passage of Scripture that serves as the basis for this sermon is the 18th chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew. It is a story that Jesus told as He responded to Peter -- who was quite pleased with himself that he had fol-

lowed the Biblical injunction of forgiving people seven times seven, only to have Jesus say to him — "not seven times seven, but seventy times seven - - there should be no end to your forgiving nature . . .

"Therefore is the kingdom of heaven likened unto a certain king, which would take account of his servants.

And when he had begun to reckon, one was brought unto him, which owed him ten thousand talents.

But forasmuch as he had not to pay, his lord commanded him to be sold, and his wife, and children, and all that he had, and payment to be made.

The servant therefore fell down, and worshipped him, saying, Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay thee all.

Then the lord of that servant was moved with compassion, and loosed him, and forgave him the debt.

But the same servant went out, and found one of his fellow servants, which owed him a hundred pence: and he laid hands on him, and took him by the throat, saying, Pay me that thou owest.

And his fellow servant fell down at his feet, and besought him, saying, Have patience with me, and I will pay thee all.

And he would not: but went and cast him into prison, till he should pay the debt.

So when his fellow servants saw what was done, they were very sorry, and came and told unto their lord all that was done.

Then his lord, after that he had called him, said unto him, O thou wicked servant, I forgave thee all that debt, because thou desiredst me:

Shouldst not thou also have had compassion on thy fellow servant, even as I had pity on thee?

And his lord was wroth, and delivered him to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due unto him.

So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses."

It was said a long, long time ago, by a penniless preacher. And most of us have yet to get caught up with all that He meant.

And in the meantime, some of us are pretty miserable.

And that's the reason why.

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(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"IN PRAISE OF STRATEGY"  
(Luke 16: 1-13)

THE WORLD, O GOD, is too much with us.  
We need to do repeatedly the very thing  
we're about to do now, to give some  
earnest consideration to the interpreta-  
tion of Your Holy Word. May Your Holy  
Spirit enlighten us. Through Jesus  
Christ Thy Son our Lord, who when He  
came, came preaching. Amen.

---

That's right - - He came preaching! And where do you suppose He got His sermon material? Where does any preacher get his sermon material?

He first gets it, of course, as he concentrates on the fundamental truth of God, the sacred writings. Jesus placed a high value upon the Scriptures, no question about that! But it's one thing to know the Scriptures; it's another thing to relate the scriptures to one's every-day life. And Jesus was a master at that, as any preacher ought to master that art of making the fundamental truths relevant.

Frequently that's possible if one can tell a story, or if one can relate an incident, and from that incident itself make the demonstration or the application of the fundamental truth. Now I need to tell you very quickly that to all intents and purposes Jesus Christ had a one-track mind. I think it can be established that the great and good are always people of a one-track mind. Any significant contribution that's ever been made has been made by a person who gave himself wholeheartedly to a particular objective. When Jesus Christ was here on earth He went around forever talking to people about the Kingdom of God. And He made the most of any opportunity that He had to relate to people concerning the Kingdom of God.

Now where did He get His sermon material, aside, as I said, from His concentration upon the Scriptures? Well, from things that He observed, from things that He had experienced with other people, from things that had been brought to His attention. Quite parenthetically, I should tell you that when I first paid \$5.00 for a haircut, inwardly I complained a bit, until I realized how much sermon material I really got from a barber shop every time I went! -- and if I didn't wear a clerical collar I got far more than I did the time before! One goes through life, you see, keeping his antenna up, trying to listen, to put his finger upon the pulsebeat of other people, where they are, what's important to them, and how one can bring to bear and make an impact of the fundamental truths of the Kingdom of God.

All of this is to tell you that Jesus frequently told stories. Now, the series of sermons from the 1st Luke pulpit for the most part this year are based upon the parables that He spoke. The one that inspired today's sermon is recorded in the 16th chapter of the Gospel according to Luke, and I suppose somebody had told Him this story, or He had seen it for Himself, the incident -- I have every reason to believe that it actually occurred. Let me tell you about it.

It has to do with the business world. In those days it was not given to a devout Jew to make money from interest. He was not to subscribe to the principle of usury. But nonetheless, being ingenious, he could get involved. And while he would not get involved directly, he would master-mind a scheme, perhaps, or back somebody financially, and use somebody else as an agent. And that agent would represent him then, and the net result would be that eventually the agent would bring back to him a reasonable return on the investment that had been made. But the man behind the scenes, the entrepreneur himself, never got involved directly, but he was dependent upon his factor, or his representative, to get him a good return. Now that worked out very well as long as you could trust the person involved.

But I need to tell you that they did not always practice exemplary methods

in those days, as they may not now, and a man always had to keep a close eye on the person who represented him. Now the entrepreneur discovers that his man was doing him in. He was no longer working to his advantage. In fact, he was suffering financially because of his agent. The agent heard about this, and he becomes deeply troubled. His job is at stake. He could be dismissed, and dismissed summarily. It would not only be because he was discharged, but people would get to know why it was that he was discharged. He may not be looked upon as a trustworthy person.

In the face of that, realizing how grim his future really is, the agent immediately goes into action and does a bit of fancy fast work. He calls in all the people with whom he has been doing business, and he makes an arrangement with them -- which is to their advantage, and to his as well. And the man for whom he is working still gets a certain amount of money. It's a very clever thing -- I'll read the account for you very shortly, or most certainly before the sermon is concluded, as to how he strategically pulled this thing off. He was a rascal -- no question about it. But he was shrewd and resourceful.

And when it's all told, Jesus is giving the impression that the fellow gets good marks! To all intents and purposes Jesus holds him up as Exhibit A for his resourcefulness, for his cleverness....and says to Christians -- "If only you, my disciples, could be as clever and as resourceful for the children of the light . . . " Well, you can read it for yourself.

Now, at first blush it's not easy to accept the fact that Jesus would use as Exhibit A a rascal to get His point across. But one does not necessarily have to agree with wickedness -- surely not -- when one points out something that he can learn from a person who is perpetrating such wickedness. Leslie Weatherhead used to tell the story of how when he was in the Middle East -- I think World War I -- how he was stationed there at the bend of the Tigris, and he was greatly impressed by the cleverness of the Arab thief...

....he and his cohorts would be there at night...they

would bury their revolvers in the sand, on which they slept, they would sleep peacefully -- only to discover that during the night the Arab thief would come in and get that revolver from underneath the person who was sleeping -- and the person would be absolutely undisturbed....

He also tells the story of how several of his friends were on duty one night in the desert, and they were so put out by the thievery of the Arabs that they made up their minds that they would shoot an Arab marauder on sight -- to have done with this kind of thing! They even took their revolvers, fastened them to their wrists as they buried them in the sand -- they even had two sentries on duty, watching for what they thought might happen.....and that very night the revolvers were taken and their sleep was undisturbed, and when the sentries went back to their posts, to their tents, their tents had been looted -- everything taken. And no one had been seen, and no one had been heard. The colonel in charge of course makes much of this and says, "If only we could be as resourceful -- if only we could be as clever! -- if only we could throw our energies into accomplishing good to the same degree that the perpetrators of evil goes about his night's task." There's the lesson to be learned -- to direct your energies toward an objective.

There are three lessons now let me bring to your attention from this parable: The one is, when the agent found himself in the predicament that he was, he began to think in terms only of his future. He did not dissipate his energies by trying to figure out how he got himself into the mess. His primary concern at this moment was, how do I get out of it? He concentrated on the next step that had to be taken.

.....did it ever occur to you how frequently you and I dissipate our energies lamenting the fact that we are where we are, and all the while we cripple ourselves and are weakened and are unable to take the next step that ought to be taken....

There's always another step that has to be taken, there's always another chap-

ter that has to be written. For some of us there is the tendency to sit down and cry and weep because we are where we are, and then go back and try to retrace our steps and find out how it happened. That has value only to a point. But when it cripples you as far as the next step is concerned it surely is a negative thing. Now you think about this.

This sermon is meant to be as helpful to you as it can be. Every single one of us at one time or another will find himself in a predicament. And let's concentrate then on the next step that has to be taken. Think in terms of the next chapter that has to be written. Don't allow yourself to be crippled by dwelling too much on what has already occurred.

The second thing that I think I can tell you that needs to be learned from this incident, and from this rascal, is that he assumed responsibility in his own name for getting himself out of the mess -- "What shall I do?" He didn't look to other people, he didn't go around from person to person and cry on their shoulder, expecting them to do something about it. He did not hold anybody else responsible. And that's the hardest thing for some of us to do when we find ourselves in a mess. We either try to blame somebody else or expect them to resolve it for us.

...I sit back occasionally and think of my relationship with certain people in this parish and there used to be a chap in this congregation who would come to me maybe once a year, and unburden himself, tell me all about his problems, and then he'd get up just as easily as all get-out, allowing himself to think, well now, Pastor, it's your job to worry about it -- I've told you now . . . as much as to allow himself to think, well, I don't have to worry about it any more . . .

I smile broadly when I think of Abie, who lived across the hall from Jakie in the apartment house....and Abie couldn't sleep that night, and his wife Sara, light of his eyes and love of his life, was disturbed by the fact that he kept tossing back

and forth, back and forth - - "Abie, what ails you?" says Sara, light of his eyes and love of his life. And Abie says, "Tomorrow morning at 10 o'clock, I owe Jakie \$10,000, and I don't have it! -- I can't sleep!" Sara, being a very resourceful woman, jumps out of bed and goes to the window, and she raises the window and she yells across the court -- Jakie! -- Jakie! -- Jakie!" .....Jakie answers at the window, lifts it up -- "What is it, Sara?" Sara says, "My husband Abie, he owes you \$10,000 -- it's due tomorrow morning -- he doesn't have it!"

....she slams the window, she says to Abie -- "Now you sleep -- you let him worry about it!"

There are people like that. Not so this rascal - - "What shall I do?" And he gave himself and directed his energies to resolving his problem as best he could. He personally assumed the responsibility to work his way out of it.

Now the third lesson is a bit harder to appreciate. What did he do? He went to those who owed money to the man for whom he worked....."No matter what it is that you owe - - no matter what it is, money or kind, I'll reduce the figure!" It was to their advantage. He made it to his advantage, because in doing so he was making a friend of them. And from that moment on they would owe him a favor just because he had done something kind for them. Now this is the lesson that's to be learned at this point: he was not primarily interested in the dollar amount. He wasn't trying to build up his own bank account at this particular moment so that he could have resources upon which he could draw financially. But he was making an investment in a relationship with them.

Now don't get me wrong, I have no patience with people who deliberately establish relationships in order to exploit them later on -- that isn't what I'm talking about. But I am talking about the fact that he got himself beyond the dollar sign to the point that he could think in terms of a relationship with people who very naturally then would feel kindly disposed toward him.



In case you won't recognize it, I have to tell you this, when I read the parable for you from the Bible, you will have to draw the conclusion that there isn't a single honest person in the outfit. You find dishonesty, no matter where you look....

-- the entrepreneur was dishonest because he was using the kind of business strategy that he was, using somebody else to make money for him indirectly.....

-- the agent himself was dishonest, because he was short-changing the entrepreneur, and he was exploiting his relationship with those with whom he was dealing....

-- and the people who said that they owed 80 instead of a hundred were dishonest -- they were all dishonest.

But in the face of all of that there is this one character who exhibits a great deal of resourcefulness and is very clever as he pursues his objective.

Now having said all of that, Jesus Christ says to His disciples -- to all intents and purposes you can read it this way -- "Think what would happen if those of us who are bent on pursuing the objective of the Kingdom of Heaven would be as tremendously in earnest, and give ourselves wholeheartedly to advancing the Kingdom! Think what would happen!"

I never cease to marvel how in this congregation there begins to surface so easily and honestly every evidence of resourcefulness and devotion to an objective. That's the purpose that Jesus had in mind when He spoke this parable. It's a very interesting parable. There's no other parable in the Bible quite like it.

I'm also impressed by the fact that in many of the parables that Jesus spoke, He was singing the praise of people who were energetic, of people who were single-minded, of people who had an objective.....and they pursued it.

Now before I conclude the sermon by reading the parable, let me to to the point at which I began. Jesus Christ was single-minded. No matter where He went, He always found the opportunity to relate the person or the incident to the King-

dom of God. We are His followers. We're meant to be His obedient servants. Now think very earnestly, how often do you and I in our relationship with people, or in the face of any incident or circumstance, relate it to the Kingdom of God, or vice versa? How single-minded are we?

Let me give you a very, very simple example: when a youngster for whom you have a responsibility as a parent or a grandparent tries your patience....or perhaps when some unfortunate chapter is being written by that youngster, wittingly or unwittingly, in your relationship to that youngster and the incident, no matter what it may be, how earnestly do you subscribe to the fundamental principle of trying to relate to it the basic teachings of the Kingdom of God?

Or when you find yourself in an unfortunate predicament, will you spend your energies lamenting the fact that you are where you are.....or will you earnestly endeavor to find the way through or out of the situation? And having said all of that, the bottom line still needs to be reckoned with: resourceful as we are meant to be, we who are Christian have the advantage of advantages -- God brings to bear His Holy Spirit, to enlighten us and to strengthen us. And that's an asset that isn't found anywhere else.

Now let me read it for you:

And he said also unto his disciples, There was a certain rich man, which had a steward; and the same was accused unto him that he had wasted his goods.

And he called him, and said unto him, How is it that I hear this of thee? give an account of thy stewardship; for thou mayest be no longer steward.

Then the steward said within himself, What shall I do? for my lord taketh away from me the stewardship: I cannot dig; to beg I am ashamed.

I am resolved what to do, that, when I am put out of the stewardship, they may receive me into their houses.

So he called every one of his lord's debtors unto him, and said unto the first, How much owest thou unto my lord?

And he said, A hundred measures of oil. And he said unto him, Take thy bill, and sit down quickly, and write fifty.

Then said he to another, And how much owest thou? And he said, A hundred measures of wheat. And he said unto him, Take thy bill, and write four-score.

And the lord commended the unjust steward, because he had done wisely: for the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light . . . "

May that never be said of us -- we who have so much going for us in the Kingdom of God and by the strength and purpose of the Holy Spirit . . .

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(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"ONLY ONE WAY"  
(Matthew 25: 31-46)

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God our Father  
and from His Son Jesus Christ, our Blessed  
Lord. Amen.

I hardly know what to make of it, I frankly confess in your presence, in the more than a quarter of a century that Winifred and I have been going back and forth from this place to the hills of home, I now note what I call 'the disappearing signs.' It used to be that on an average of every 40 miles — we'd find four or five of them perhaps by the time we'd arrive, such signs as these:

THE WAGES OF SIN IS DEATH

BEWARE THE WRATH OF GOD

WHERE WILL YOU SPEND ETERNITY?

Twenty-five years ago this kind of thing, although it's not particularly the Bible Belt between here and Central Pennsylvania, these signs were quite common. There aren't as many of them now.

I don't know frankly whether it's good or bad. I used to be jolted when I'd read this one: WHERE WILL YOU SPEND ETERNITY? — as though I should pull off the road immediately, take out my Bible and have a prayer session, as though to get my soul ready for anything that might happen, as though I were not prepared....

BEWARE THE WRATH OF GOD — that surely shook me up, because the last thing that I hoped to entertain on the face of God would be the look of wrath....

In a certain sense I feel very pleased that some of those signs are disappearing. But on the other hand, I'm quick to say that I'm not so sure that it's salutary, because it does remove from the horizon what we ought to see there, some indication that Judgement is ahead.

By the same token, one of the women that I love most in this world used to

tell me how when she was a child her mother would say to her, "Be careful where you go, because if Jesus were to come today, make certain that you'd find yourself in a place where He'd be happy to find you. Don't go anywhere, don't do anything, of which you'd be ashamed on Judgment Day, and if Judgement were to come today." Mothers, they tell me, don't talk to their children like that any more.

And that troubles me a bit, honestly it does. Not that I'd want to order a person's life possibly as though he were to be fully aware of the wrath of God to be visited momentarily. I never could find it in my heart to appreciate the Cotton Mather sermon in the New England church where he held his congregation spellbound for two-and-a-half hours on "Sinners In The Hand Of An Angry God." But the fact remains, when such signs disappear, we can very easily quit thinking about Judgment.

Daniel Webster once sat in a meeting with fourteen people in the Hotel Astor in New York. People observed that he was reticent, pensive, slow to become involved in the conversation. And the friend who sat alongside of him thought to get him involved because he had much to offer - - "Tell me, Mr. Webster, what is the most profound thought that you've ever had in your life?"

...that's quite an assignment to give a person..... Webster responded in a very gracious way: he ran his hand over his forehead, and then whispered to the person who put the question to him, -- "All these people in this room -- do they really know me?" And his friend said, "Yes -- they all consider themselves your friend." ....and then Webster stood up, and for an hour he spoke to those people about what he called his most profound thought: "My Personal Responsibility to God, and The Prospect of Being Eventually Judged By God -- For Who I Am and What I've Done."

Gone from the scene, I'm afraid, in too many places is this element of personal responsibility before God. And that's what happens, you see, when you soft-pedal this whole business of Judgment. But every time you and I come to church we're supposed to put it out there in front of us - - ". . and He will come again -- to judge" . . . you can't make it any bolder than that!

This sermon this morning is another on the parables that Jesus spoke, a series begun last September -- and hopefully will conclude the last Sunday of the next month. You need to listen carefully now to this parable of the Last Judgment, one of the last parables, one of the last stories that Jesus spoke. I wish you could share, as some of us can right now, that visual recollection of the spot where presumably He spoke this parable. If you were to ask me my favorite sites in the Holy Land, I'd be quick to say that this is one of them. If you were to ask me my three favorite churches in the Holy Land, I'm about to do that for you: one is the Church of the Beatitudes. It stands on the very graceful slope overlooking the Sea of Galilee, and I can still hear certain members of our parish, when we took them there, who would open the Good Book, presumably at that very place.....

....another favorite church of mine is the Church of Our Father, the Pater Noster Church, which overlooks the ancient city of Jerusalem....and to this day when you walk around the church you can find the Lord's Prayer in at least 60 different languages....and I cherish for myself the fact that someone brought me the prayer as it was spoken in Arabic, the prayer that my parents prayed. That church has a claim on my soul....

But my favorite of favorites is the Church of All Nations. Let

me tell you about it. It's located hard-by, that's close by, the Garden of Gethsemane, in fact you can go through the Garden of Gethsemane to enter the church. Its windows are of alabaster, its interior is very simple. Inside the Communion rail is a huge boulder, reminiscent of the kind of rock undoubtedly upon which our Blessed Lord knelt in that night of agony in the Garden of Gethsemane.

The facade of the church is very colorful. But what impresses me most are these two things that I'm about to mention:

-- the church was built by contributions from Christians all over the world, all nations subscribed to its construction....

-- now this is exceedingly precious -- it faces a gate into the old city of Jerusalem that's now closed, but one day will be opened, according to tradition, according to Scripture -- when Jesus Christ returns in glory, the Day of Judgment....and all the nations will follow Him into the Eternal City.

I tell you this sort of thing because I think it was there, or in a spot like that, where that church was built, that Jesus sat down with the company of disciples, one of the last times He talked with them, and talked to them about Judgment. Let me read it for you -- it's a great passage of Scripture -- wooed more people in the direction of Heaven, I dare say, than any number of other passages. More good has been done by it as people took the passage seriously, than perchance any number of other passages as well. Bear with me now, you need to hear all fifteen verses:

"When the Son of man shall come in his glory,  
and all the holy angels with him, then shall  
he sit upon the throne of his glory:

And before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats:

And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left.

Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world:

For I was ahungered, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in:

Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me.

Then shall the righteous answer him"-- listen to this! "Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee ahungered, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink?

When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee?

Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee?

And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.

Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels:

For I was ahungered, and ye gave me no meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink:

I was a stranger, and ye took me not in: naked, and ye clothed me not: sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not.

Then shall they also answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee ahungered, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto thee?

Then shall he answer them, saying, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me.

And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal."



It's a parable of Judgment, that's what it is, and spoken by our Lord Jesus Christ.

Now there are people who don't care to think in terms of Judgment. They have no relish at all for a line being drawn: and on one side the good.....and on the other side the wicked - - and on the one side those who will enjoy eternal bliss.....and on the other side those who will experience the torments of the damned. They don't want to think in those terms, so they ignore the concept of Judgment.

But our Blessed Lord, in one of the last messages He gave His disciples, said, "This is it!" - - and He put it out there in front of them, laid it all out.

Now what can I say to you about Judgment this morning, as I exercise the responsibility that God has given to me to interpret this Word to you? Let me go along as quickly as I can -- be patient if I only skim the surface.

-- first, there is such a thing as Judgment, there is such a thing as Judgment Day, there is such a thing as a line being drawn, there is such a thing as Heaven....there is such a thing as Hell. I can't make it come out any other way. That's the first thing that needs to be said.

-- the second thing that needs to be said is this: that in the time of Judgment it will be made plain to us as to whether or not we've passed the test. Whether you care to accept it or not, life is one great school-house experience, and there is always an examination time, and there's always a test that has to be faced.

At this time of the year when some of us go back and reflect

upon our days on the college campus, we do recall how happily we discovered that some courses were a breeze, and they're a great help to us. But some of us also remember how there were certain required courses that were not a breeze....and when we knew that we had to take them we faced them with a great deal of fear and trembling, lest we fail....because people have been known to fail.

Would you believe me if I were to tell you with all the strength that I can command, as far as the test of Judgment Day is concerned: it is a test that lies within the capability of every single one of us to pass! No one need fail. That's the kind of God that we have, not that He makes it easy for us, but He's given us that capability, that it is possible to pass the test.

The third thing that needs to be said is this: the test is not particularly easy, but it's simple. I'm hesitating for a moment because I know I'm going to startle you. In the time of Judgment I'm not so sure that we're going to be condemned to Hell primarily because of all the evil that we have done.

....now be very patient with me when I tell you that. Each of us, all of us have our propensity toward evil. None of us can have done with it. We're always going to be part of it, one way or another. But as I read this passage very carefully, none of us is going to be consigned to Hell primarily because of all the Hell that we let loose on earth. This is Judgment -- not primarily because of the evil we perpetrated....but because of the good that we could have done that we failed to do....

You read this parable for yourself -- all the love that we could have let loose - - that's how we're going to be judged. And it lies within

every single one of us to be a loving person. And God gives us opportunity after opportunity to pass the test.

I smile broadly in your presence when I say, as my secretary has heard me say sometimes -- my prayer of prayers is that God would allow me to be a good pastor....and then day after day, sometimes almost to my displeasure, He gives me ample opportunity to prove it! So God is always giving us this chance to do good -- there's always somebody within reach who's in need of love and attention.

You'll notice in this text that we're required to pass -- it isn't how much we know. You can be theologically illiterate, so to speak, and still get to Heaven. You can be penniless, you can be a pauper.....it isn't how much you have....and still get to Heaven. It's on the basis of how much love you've allowed to be channeled through your life into the life of somebody else.

This is not an easy thing for church people sometimes to remember. I read some time ago about a group of people who came out of a prayer meeting, and as they were leaving the prayer meeting they encountered a woman, staggering down the road, disheveled, almost in a drunken stupor. Among those who happened to be present in that group was an expression of their reaction: complete impatience, disgust -- as they exercised judgment upon this woman who was drunk. And only one out of the group came forward and walked over to this very unattractive person, and said, "My dear, please let me help you to get home." Presumably all the time they were praying, they were thinking how right they were with God, and when the time of judgment came, all the things that they could say to their credit.

Charlotte Bronte, bless her soul, when she died there were those who observed that there were two people who stood by her grave a bit

longer than anybody else. One was the prostitute in the village that she had befriended when everybody else had turned their backs upon her . . . and the other was a blind person to whom Charlotte Bronte had been as a pair of eyes. And I say to myself, when my last hour should come, and I would be laid to rest, I would be pleased indeed if there could be two people somewhere who might come forward - - not to remember the evil of my life, but some simple unremembered act of kindness that I had done -- unselfishly, and according to the mind and spirit of Jesus Christ, for somebody else.

I don't appreciate too much all television, but I do appreciate Steve Allen's "The Meeting of The Minds." I sometimes wish I were in a position to recommend to him two characters: I'd know a measure of delight in having him choose Jean-Paul Sartre and Jesus Christ to share the same program.....because Sartre, you know, was the one who said: "Hell is other people -- they're always getting in our way -- they impede our speed, they annoy us, they irritate us . . Hell is other people."

I'd know a measure of delight in having Jesus Christ say to him, "My good brother, other people constitute your ticket to Heaven -- other people constitute your opportunity to let Heaven loose!"

That's why Jesus told the story that He did. Go home and read it again won't you? We're going to be judged - - now don't make too much of this -- not by the evil we've perpetrated.....we're going to be judged by the good we've done -- or failed to do. Still as of all, your life and mind is fashioned by people who love us, or who refuse to love us. This I most certainly believe.

\* \* \* \*

"RICH MAN, BEGGAR MAN"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God  
our Father and from His Son Jesus  
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

Let me refresh your memory - - when Christianity first came to the British Isles, the messenger of the Good News of Jesus Christ was received by the King of the Northumbrians. He entertained him well, gave him a fine dinner, and after dinner he said, "Now we will receive you in the great hall, and you will please tell us what your new religion has to say about life after death. If you have anything to tell us, we will listen to you. If you have nothing to say, then we will dismiss you."

The mind of man has always been curious about what it's going to be like after death. What will it be like after death?...

....where does one go? what happens?.....

Want an answer? a Christian answer?

It all depends.

Having said that, let me read for you now a passage of Scripture that serves as the basis for today's sermon, another being preached on the Parables spoken by our Blessed Lord. This one is recorded in the 16th chapter of the Gospel according to Luke. Due to circumstances it will be preached quickly and briefly.

*"There was a certain rich man, which was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day:  
And there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, which was laid at his gate, full of sores,  
And desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table: moreover the dogs came and licked his sores.  
And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom: the rich man also died, and was buried;*

*And in hell he lifted up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom.  
And he cried and said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.  
But Abraham said, Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things: and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented.  
And beside all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us, that would come from thence.  
Then he said, I pray thee therefore, father, that thou wouldest send him to my father's house:  
For I have five brethren; that he may testify unto them, lest they also come into this place of torment.  
Abraham saith unto him, They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.  
And he said, Nay, father Abraham: but if one went unto them from the dead, they will repent.  
And he said unto him, If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead."*

And I suppose once Jesus told that story, He shook his head and said,  
"And that's the way it is!"

You need to know that centuries before Jesus Christ, presumably, there were those who pictured life after death. They said, there is a Heaven, there is a Hell. And according to their interpretation, people could see one another, and deliberately so, according to those who designed the Judgment. The people in Heaven could look down on the people in Hell and see how they were being tortured and tormented and enjoy a measure of peace because this is what they had escaped. And good deeds and noble intentions now were paying off. This is what they could enjoy as they looked down and saw the damned and the tortured.....

....while those in the place of Hell would be able to look over and see those in Heaven -- thoroughly at peace and enjoying one another, possessed with a measure of bliss.....and all the while, tormented in Hell, becoming fully aware of the fact that they were now being

denied -- and all of this beyond any element of change.

The Day of Judgment had arrived. The decision was irrevokable, irreversible.

There are those who maintain it was done that way deliberately.. Jesus was telling a story. Indicated in this passage of Scripture are several things that you and I cannot afford to ignore.

(1) Jesus believed in an after-life;

(2) Jesus believed in a Heaven...Jesus believed in a Hell. And the line would be drawn. There would be people in Heaven, there would be people in Hell.

He also gave us to understand that once this happens, there isn't anything that can be done about it. There is a school of thought that maintains -- I know it -- that maybe after we die God in His mercy will give us a second chance. You may cling to that if you wish. I really can't give you too much encouragement, on the basis of this parable at least. For if this parable says anything in that regard, it says there is no second chance.

And the other thing that's so very clear in this parable is this: that whatever we experience after life, that destiny is going to be shaped pretty much by the kind of people we are in the here and now.

Have done with the notion, my friend, if you've ever entertained it, that as soon as you die everything will be marvelously transformed for you, dramatically so. They used to picture Heaven as a place where angels went on singing in an interminable manner....I know some people get terribly restless when a hymn has five stanzas ....I can hardly think that they're gearing themselves for Heaven, if they can't tolerate a hymn that has more than four stanzas. According to the Parable that Jesus told, what's it going to be like?

....all depends on what you're like now.

Let's look at it very quickly. What conclusions beyond this can we draw? You have to say to yourself, and don't hesitate to say it - - Dives did not go to Hell because he was rich....Lazarus did not go to Heaven because he was poor. There are people who are poor who in their misery become cynical and bitter and anti-social, and commit all kinds of crimes to get even with society. They are not exemplary, they are not material for Heaven....

...and by the same token, there are any number of rich people who look upon their wealth as an opportunity to glorify God and to meet the needs of other people.

Lazarus did not go to Heaven because he was poor and miserable.... Dives did not go to Hell because he was rich and enjoyed the good things of this world. Why did each end up where he did?

The name Lazarus is important. It means a dependency upon God, it means a desire to receive the mercy of God. Whatever a person's condition or circumstance in life may be, as long as this is his orientation, as long as this is the direction of his soul, God will forever deal graciously with that person.

Dives was rich. Being rich, he thought only of himself and of himself alone, and this was his besetting sin. He never paid any attention to Lazarus while Lazarus was there at his gate. He allowed him to be part of the landscape, he allowed him to be part of the conditions in life which he said to himself were no concern to him at all. And he felt no obligation to improve the lot of his fellow man. He thought of himself, and of himself alone.

I once had a professor who said to me, "Shaheen, I'm going to give you a definition of Hell. You can't read it in any book, but when I've observed life as I have, this is my definition of Hell - - "



I was all ears. What was his definition of Hell? -- "A person being left to himself, and to himself alone." Any person who in this world thinks of himself and only of himself ends up being that kind of person. And for myself, I can't think of anything more hellish than to be cut off from God, to be cut off from people, and to be left with myself on my hands, and only myself. That would be pure Hell.

Dives was in Hell because his world was no bigger than Dives. Sometimes I think, honestly I do, that God has so made us and He said, "You can have anything you want -- go get it!"....and that's exactly what any number of people do, and they end up getting just what they want! And that determines whether they are in Heaven, and whether they are in Hell. Really now, it can be as simple as all that! And as perceptive as anything that I've read in recent years is this simple statement: Hell is the truth found out too late.

One also notes from this parable how Dives all of a sudden gets tremendously concerned about Lazarus -- No! -- about his own family. So he says, Get the word to my brothers -- let them escape! If only they could be warned in advance! And now that's something to think about. Do we really need any more information? Do we really need any more knowledge than we've already received? According to this parable -- No. They have enough information already, they have enough knowledge that's been given already. Even if one came back from the dead -- that wouldn't be convincing. We are either sensitive or insensitive to what's being offered to us. Now that's an awesome thought: You and I already in this present moment know the way to Heaven. We know the circumstances and conditions that are meant to prevail. We know this already! We don't need any further information. That's an awesome thought, really. But God in His

mercy has seen fit to reveal Himself, has given us Jesus Christ, to show us the way. And because we can't possibly gain Heaven by our own merit, Jesus says "Trust me, and I'll get you there; and in the meantime, live according to my pattern."

What's the first thing that Jesus Christ asks of us, any of us? Not how much we know, not how much we have. The first thing that Jesus Christ asks of any of us is "Follow me!" And he who follows Jesus Christ is always moving in the direction of Heaven.

Oh, I have got to finish this brief sermon with the illustration that I presume any preacher worth his salt has used a hundred times. No matter how long or short his ministry.....

.....a man dies and goes to Heaven. He had a very good opinion of himself, and when he got to Heaven he expected St. Peter to show him a wonderful place in which to live, magnificent guest quarters. He was shocked to discover that St. Peter showed him a little bit of a hut, almost like a lean-to, made out of just fragments of beaten-up material, almost discarded material, almost worthless.

.....in protest the man says, 'I can't understand this, I'm surely entitled to something better. Won't you please explain?' And St. Peter says, "Of course I'll explain - - we use the material that you send us."

Now that's something to think about.

\* \* \* \*

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"TWO MEN"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God  
our Father and from His Son Jesus  
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

Today's sermon is the next-to-the-last in the series on the general theme of the Parables, a series that was begun last September. This is the way it reads, as recorded in the 18th chapter of the Gospel according to Luke:

*"Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican.*

*The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican.*

*I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess.*

*And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner.*

*I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted."*

It was a parable, a story with a surprise ending. For surely they never believed that it would have ended the way that it did. You'll keep that in mind, won't you? It was a deliberate jolt -- and I need to tell you this -- there is reason to believe that Jesus intended it that way. It was unadulterated shock therapy.

Well, let's get on with it. Two men.

At the very mention of it you begin to compare and contrast. You speak only of one person, and psychologically you don't adjust to thinking in terms of something else or someone else. One situation stands by itself. But mention two -- and immediately you begin to compare or contrast.

Jesus intended that to be true in this parable as well -- two men. And then He went on to draw the line between them, to tell us how decidedly different they were. And once He had done that magnificently, then He comes in with the surprise conclusion.

Let's look at these two men -- the one a Pharisee -- a good man, a good record. How you'll react when I tell you this I don't know, but I'm in duty bound to tell you -- he's the kind of person that I have reason to believe that any congregation would welcome to have his name on its roll. He took his religion seriously, he supported it generously. He had a high and holy regard for what the church represented....

...he resented those who didn't know what the rules were, and he became infuriated with those who didn't practice what they professed. That's how seriously he took his religion....

...he was a man who had a good track record. Why then, I say to you, did Jesus Christ condemn such a person?

On the other hand -- two men, remember -- this man with the enviable record....the other man, who could not so much as muster up one good deed to his credit, whose only cry was "God, have mercy!" And Jesus Christ says "This man is to be commended."

Let me tell you a little bit about him. He was a publican. That's the other term for tax collector. Now you have to understand what this tax-collecting business was like in the day of Jesus. It was 'farmed out' so to speak, by the occupying authorities. They would go and look for some Jew and say to him, "Now you have this area, and we expect from this area a certain amount of money at the end of the revenue year. You can set your own scale, but this is

what we require from you - - over and above it, you line your own pockets." And that's exactly what every publican did! He not only was a collaborator with the occupying authorities - - he was also a man who exploited his fellow-man. He was considered to be a rascal, you couldn't trust him. Now here he is. And Jesus says, "This is the man upon whom I am going to place the halo." They couldn't possibly believe it, that Jesus Christ was saying what He was saying.

Nor, I dare say, do you and I. When you take this parable at face value and you look at it just as it is, how in heaven's name did Jesus Christ commend a rascal and condemn an exemplary church-goer?

I need to remind you that Jesus Christ was the kind of a person who told it exactly as it is. Sometimes we permit ourselves the foolish notion of thinking that He was always going around patting people on the back, that sometimes He represented something less than integrity. I suppose any man in public office envies the person who doesn't have to think ten times before he speaks a single word, lest he be misunderstood or lest his motives be questioned. Not so Jesus Christ in this case. Deliberately and forthrightly He calls it as it is, and also tells the people why He is saying what He is saying, so that perhaps when the conclusion came they might not have been as jolted as they were.

Did it ever occur to you how much of a compliment Jesus Christ paid his disciples by jolting them as He did -- because he was willing to believe that they could be responsive enough to accept what he was saying and to recognize the inherent truth. It takes a bit of doing for people to respond with honesty and integrity to something that they may not like to hear.

But Jesus Christ does not deal with us as babies. He is not always giving us a milk diet. Every now and then He gives us sturdy, heady stuff. And this is an excellent case in point.

Now, let's take another look at these men. This time the comparison -- which we forget to do....

...both want to the temple...both prayed.

Both gave God some assurance that they had some understanding of themselves. And

that's something to be said....

Would you believe me if I were to tell you, if one were to make bold to know the mind of God, one may presume it must be very pleasing to God when He discovers a person who may come into His presence who has some assessment of himself, who has some understanding of his own nature and his own character -- whether it be right or wrong! -- at least to have some understanding as to who you happen to be. Some people never reach the point where they can figure that out.

I was delighted yesterday in the church office to see one of our members who has traveled the road of life a bit farther and longer than I have, and with a delightful look in her eye she said, "But Pastor, I am happy to tell you that when I've reached the age that I have, I have been able to figure some things out! Not everyone can say that. And maybe it's because we're not honest enough with ourselves, -- but both of these fellows happened to have been honest!

The one chap was honest enough to tell God that he had a good opinion of himself -- "Look what I've done, God -- I've stayed out of jail....I have shown up at church....I've given 10% "(chances are he gave more!) " . . I've served on committees....I have a high regard for what your law represents!.....and until the day I die I'll defend the orthodoxy of my religion -- " He was that kind of a

fellow. What went wrong? Well, that's the opinion that he had of himself -- an opinion that allowed himself to believe that he had arrived. And that's what did him in.

I once read a story a short time ago about a man who observed some people that he had come to meet and to know across the years, and there's this one person that he thought, honestly, that he was an exemplary Christian. And he continued to think that of the man until the man himself told him what a wonderful person he was. This is the trouble with the Pharisee -- he was good -- so good that he could even inform the Almighty as to how he had arrived.....but it's risky business for any person ever to permit himself to think that he's arrived as far as God is concerned.

One of the noblest of all prayers that I think is to be found in all of Christendom is the prayer that comes from our Catholic brothers and sisters that goes something like this: "And in the hour of death suffer none of us to fall from thee" - - there is always that possibility. Fallaciously, the Pharisee allowed himself to think he had it made.

One of the better things that I've seen on television I saw a number of years ago, an interesting drama called "The Shadow of The Devil." It was the story of a woman with a past who became a convert to the Christian faith. And her whole life was completely re-oriented - - but - - as the drama unfolded, she never had done with the Devil on her tail. To the very day that she died the shadow of the Devil was cast against her -- even to the very gate of Paradise! We never have it made on our own. And no one has a right to strut into the presence of God and to parade his virtue.

On the other hand, here is the publican, who could not muster up one good thing to his credit, and his only prayer was "Lord, have

mercy!" Where did I read the story of that man who spent his entire life-time, once he had come under the influence of Christ, just going around day after day, second after second, reciting the prayer --

"Lord, have mercy!...Lord, have mercy!...Lord, have mercy!..."  
It fashioned his whole life.

....I remember my college days when choral groups went around, and there was always one number that they included and I was pleased to hear -- it came out of the Orthodox church --

"Lord, have mercy!...Lord, have mercy!...Lord, have mercy!

Lord, have mercy!...Lord, have mercy'...." -- the cry of the publican.

What else can I tell you about these two men? The measuring rod that they used -- the Pharisee measured himself by the publican, and allowed himself to become superior as he kept the publican an inferior person. That's exactly why Jesus told the story, because of those who had this noble opinion of themselves and despised others -- he could keep himself secure as long as the publican could be held down! That's why some people gossip. They get a measure of satisfaction when they talk about the things that other people have done that they haven't done! That's one of the dastardly things about gossip . . . it makes it so easy to be self-righteous.

Why did Jesus tell the story? Why did he paint God as He did? -- a God who would condemn one and sing the praise of the other? For the simple reason He wants us to understand the basic nature and character of God -- God is one who always wants to help...God is one who wants to see us improve....God is one who wants to see us become better than we are. And what can God do for a man who feels he's already arrived? What can God do for a man who doesn't need him? That's what did the Pharisee in -- he had no need of God, ex-



cept to use God as a listening-post by which he could recite his virtues.

How much better do you want to be than you are? Good question. The publican wanted to be so much better than he was...and the only way he could improve his lot would be to depend upon a merciful God.

I know a thrill in my soul when I realize that the God who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is like that. He wants us to be better than we are - - and we can be better than we are -- as long as we cry out for His help! How much better do you want to be than you are? God question, really . . . "And he spoke this parable to certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others:" - - I don't think there was a very calm tone in His voice. I think there could have been thunder - - and I think there could have been fire in His eyes -- because He saw how dastardly this thing was.....a person alienating himself from another person. And as he alienated himself from that person, he alienated himself from God . .

*"Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican . . . I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted . . "*

Now I ask you -- what do you suppose he was like a year later, when the publican prayed again -- this man whose prayer for mercy had been heard by God? Do you suppose he paraded in front of God what a good person he was? -- because God had been good to him. Do you suppose he kept talking about "Look, God, what I've done with what you've given me!" Ah, be careful, my friend. There can be such a thing as the pride not only of the Pharisee...there can also be such a thing as the proud publican. For the Devil has his way of worming into our hearts, whatever our situation may be, and the door that he likes most to enter is the door of Pride.

(transcribed as recorded)

June 22, 1981

"LOST AND FOUND"  
(Luke 25:1-10)

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God  
our Father and from His Son Jesus  
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

If one were to prefer to preaching as a trade, I presume one could easily speak, in the jargon, of "How To - " sermons, or occasionally, not too often, there are people who come to a preacher and say, "Preacher, would you please preach a sermon on "How To Handle Death" . . . "How To Handle Grief" . . . "How To Handle Defeat" . . . "How To Handle Criticism." For none of us who lives out the days of his years is ever without the possibility of facing such a situation....

....Defeat can come to any one of us

....and who among us now hasn't known when the circle has been broken by death? . . . and then the grieving process goes on, and we hardly know how to cope with it....

....who among us hasn't known what it is to have to experience criticism?

How does a Christian face it?

The passage of Scripture which serves as the basis for today's sermon, I dare say would be an excellent case study for such a subject. Our Blessed Lord was being criticized for being the kind of person that He was, and for associating with the kind of people with whom He frequently met. You'll recognize that at once as I read these introductory verses of the 15th chapter of the Gospel according to Luke. Incidentally, the entire 15th chapter deals with the stories that Jesus told. Some refer to them as a trilogy -- Jesus speaking about the lost, and the found -- a lost sheep, a lost coin, a lost son. And some who make a very

in that section, because in a certain sense both sons were lost -- the one who wandered away, and surely the one who stayed at home, had separated himself from his father and his brother as well:

*"Then drew near unto him all the publicans and  
sinners for to hear him.  
And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying,  
This man receiveth sinners, and eats with them . . ."*

So he was subject to their criticism.

How did He handle it? -- supposedly, as you might suppose He would, for He exactly knew who He was, what He was meant to do. And He knew who they were who criticized Him. And He had enough faith in their integrity that once they would allow Him to speak and answer their concerns, telling them the whole story, they might understand. Now that's exactly what happened.

They had criticized Him because He spent a great deal of His time with the so-called irreligious and the non-religious. They didn't know *why* He did it. He knew. Which leads me to say to you now, without any hesitation -- you never properly understand Jesus until you see Him as God. A lot of people simply see Him as a person, a teacher, a preacher, a miracle-worker....but as the Creeds express it as well they should, as fingers could be put to our lips separately, thinking of Jesus Christ: "very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father . . ." This is Jesus Christ -- God come to us -- God come to us in order that we might know what God is like.

Small wonder, then, that the Apostle Paul, speaking of Jesus Christ, could say, in that sublimest of manners: "In Him was all the fullness of God pleased to dwell." Also on that occasion when some of the disciples came to Jesus and they said, "Show us the Father and we will be satisfied -- ...because we really want to know what God is like," . . . and then Jesus quietly, confidently, without any hyperbole, simply said, "Look at me! He who has seen me has seen the Father."

You know what really bothers most people, don't you, when they think about God? And the question is: How can it be that He has a way of letting each of us

question. Eventually almost any person who has any inclination to take life seriously, will recognize the fact that over and above and beyond him, whether he calls it a person, a force, a something or someone, this happens to be true. And man is a dependent creature. Life has a way of making this plain to us. So the question-of-questions isn't: Is there a God? For any number of people the question is: What's He like? And I suppose that's one very important reason why Jesus Christ came, so that that question could be answered.

And that's exactly why Jesus Christ did what He did and lived the life that He did. His whole life is a demonstration of it, and when people couldn't quite understand what He was demonstrating, He used words in order to communicate with them, that they wouldn't miss the understanding of who He was and what He was meant to do.

I place a high regard on the Scriptures, you know that I do, because I cherish the way Martin Luther put it. When Martin Luther referred to the Bible, he says, "It's in the Bible that we find Jesus Christ." -- it's his way of saying it: "The Bible is the cradle of Christ" -- that's where Christ is to be found. And you never read the Bible until you have this introduction to and this identification with God who comes to us in the form of Jesus Christ. The Bible is not a book about man; the Bible is a book about God, and God dealing with man as a sinful creature, and what happens when men treat one another as less than they're meant to be as children of God....and then what God decides to do about it when His children behave shamefully...

....so Jesus Christ came, seeking out the irreligious and the non-religious and spending time with them. And there were people who couldn't quite understand.

Now how did He handle that situation?

With the utmost of confidence, He simply related to them by telling them a couple of stories, hoping that as those stories were being told they would recognize what it was saying to them, and that they would understand.

So they came to him — "Why do you spend time with these people? — the lost — the irreligious, the non-religious...the disreputable ones?" Jesus had a word for them. He didn't call them sinners. Isn't that a happy thought?

Jesus called them lost

....he told them the story about the shepherd who had a hundred sheep....are you aware of the fact that the relationship between the shepherd and the sheep was so intimate, so personal, that eventually a shepherd would have names for each one of his sheep?

More than one student of the Near East has studied this kind of thing, and occasionally there would be what they would call communal sheep-folds, where a shepherd would bring his flock, and another shepherd would bring his flock, and they would mingle together — then in the morning when it was time to take them out — how could he sort his sheep? — by calling them by name — that's how much a single sheep meant to the shepherd. And Jesus exploited that sublimely in the telling of this story.

For our purpose this morning the shepherd brings his sheep, they have been out....they return now to the safety of the security and the shelter of the fold or the cave . . . 94...95...96...97...98...99 . . . One is missing. Is he content to say, "I have 99% of what I ought to have. I shall not worry about 1%?"

Do you remember that sermon Pastor David preached for you one time about that very special number as far as God is concerned? God has a special number, and that special number is always 1. So said Jesus Christ, the shepherd goes out to look for that one sheep until he finds it. And when he finds it he brings it home rejoicing, because the lost is found.

How do you characterize yourself, my friend, in the sight of God, that is? Lost? . . . or found? . . . or better still, if you don't mind, lost-and-found. For in a certain sense every single one of us has the propensity to become lost.

simply by straying away, not giving much heed to what he's doing. That's why we try to drill into those who are young certain basic rules and regulations and say, "Don't forget them! . . . Don't forget them! . . . don't forget them! . . . " This is why we keep reminding them.

Oh, I need to tell you quite quickly, that man Job in the Old Testament, he was a grand and wonderful person. That's why some people can't understand why he had to endure what he did because even when he reached old age, what did he do -- as a veritable patriarch he would gather his sons around him and then he'd hold a kind of court in which he'd remind them of the things that he had taught them. A sheep gets lost by forgetting what it's been taught, as it pays its attention only to the things at hand and becomes completely pre-occupied with the present moment, until eventually it gets farther and farther and farther away. A sheep that goes astray does not go astray deliberately, I dare say. But there are people who go astray -- I should say there are people who become lost because they deliberately choose to take a course that will lead into the far country where they will become lost.

The Prodigal Son was such a person. He made up his mind to separate himself from where he had been -- he chose to go where he was going to go, and became lost. But when a person becomes lost it really doesn't make much difference as to how he got there when you have to recognize the price that has to be paid in the lostness. And I suppose that's one reason why Jesus seldom if ever, to my knowledge, condemned the lost. Pity for them? -- yes. Concern for them? -- yes. Compassion? -- always. Now this is the kind of God that we have. Jesus came to show us what God is like.

When I was in college we used to delight in presuming to know what God is really like, and then there were those who said, "God is like a God who creates what He creates and says, "That's my day's work" - - like a watchmaker who puts the watch together, having designed it, manufactured the parts, then he winds it up and he's satisfied with the clock-work...tick-tock...tick-tock...tick-tock...tick-tock..."

puts it on the shelf and walks away -- that's it! With no more concern for it. He's done his day's work -- no more of an obligation. The God who revealed Himself in the Scriptures is not that kind of God. And there's a happy thought for you! The God who has a continuing concern for us, a God who said, "I made you with freedom of choice -- you could go to Hell. But I won't let you! I'll do everything I can to keep you from going to Hell."

Says the prophet Ezekiel magnificently -- "Behold, I, even I, will both seek and save my sheep" . . . and that's exactly what Jesus Christ says "I have come to do." -- hoping now that those who couldn't quite understand, once they got the facts they'd get the whole picture and learn to appreciate the basic nature and character of God himself.

Now I am going to surprise you a bit, if you don't mind. Be patient with me. At first blush you may not want to accept what I'm going to say. You may have your moments when you think that God holds us responsible for getting lost. I think sometimes God may excuse us for having gotten lost. We are that human...we are that human. And God can understand, He knows that we are not perfect.

I know a measure of satisfaction in the way that idol of mine a few years back -- Pope John 23rd, used to put it -- "You see a great deal, you correct as much as you can, and you forget much." We want God to forget much in relationship to our sinfulness. We don't want Him to remember them forever. And I believe that God then may excuse us for our lostness. But I'm equally convinced that because He made us as He did, with a measure of sensitivity to responsibility and integrity, He will not excuse us if we deliberately remain in our lostness and do not endeavor to put ourselves into a position where we can be found.

There was that little boy who went to an athletic event with crowds upon crowds of people. He found his way to the ticket office. The person at the ticket office said, "Are you lost, buddy?" He said, "Yes, but this is the place where I am to be found because this is where my daddy told me to come if I got lost." God made us with the capacity and the responsibility to return to be found. And God

THE THIRD STORY OF A TRILOGY:  
"THREE PEOPLE"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God  
our Father and from His Son Jesus  
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

Necessity dictates that I face the mirror when I shave. But I frankly confess to you that I spend as little time as possible doing that sort of thing because I've reached the age where one is forced to admit that what he sees is what he's got!

This is reminiscent, of course, of the columnist, who writing for St. Valentine's Day, got in touch with her uncle who had been married between 40 and 50 years, and she said to him, "Uncle, tell me, what's the secret for your fidelity? What's kept your marriage together all of these years?" He replied in a very interesting manner, perhaps you read it - - he said, "My dear, each morning when I shave and I look at myself, I say to myself, you're no prize!" What one sees is what one's got - - and may be stuck with it.

And all of this is mindful, of course, of the book to which I refer occasionally when I preached to you that series of sermons on the Parables, a series of sermons begun last September, concluded the last Sunday in June. A book was written by a distinguished German preacher, Helmut Thielicke. His book bears the title "The Waiting Father" and in the introduction to that book he tells about his little boy who stood almost stark naked in front of the mirror, absolutely fascinated, until suddenly it occurred to him that what he saw in the mirror happened to be himself. And that's the purpose that's served by mirrors, of course, that we might have our image reflected and that we might be able to see ourselves as we are.

Did it ever occur to you that when Jesus spoke the stories that He did, He



holds us responsible if we deliberately refuse to respond to His longing, to His calling, to His seeking. And that's something to think about.

We were meant to be found . . . and the thing is lost as long as it's out of its relationship. We were meant to be the obedient children of God. And that's what God wants us to be.

★ ★ ★ ★

spoke the parables not only that we might get some image of God, but that in the telling of the stories we might get some image of ourselves. And you and I need to remember that. You can't possibly get an image of God without seeing something of yourself.....and because we're made in God's image we can't possibly think of ourselves without seeing some image of God.

That truth is very implicit in the parable to which I invite your attention now. It's the third of three stories told by Jesus. They constitute the entire chapter, the 15th chapter of the Gospel according to Luke. When I last preached to you on the parables I spoke to you about "LOST AND FOUND" -- the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin. But I'm still drawn to this parable. Be patient with me, I can't have done with it and I invite your attention to it now.

The third of the three stories that Jesus told on the general theme of LOST AND FOUND -- well, no matter how familiar you may be with it, you need to hear it again. And brace yourself, will you -- try to hear it as though you were hearing it for the first time. Get caught up in all the trauma of it, in all the drama that's typical of these three people.

" And he said, A certain man had two sons:

And the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his living.

And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living.

And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want.

And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine.

And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him.

And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger!

I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee,

And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants.

And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him.

And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son.

But the father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet:

And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry:

For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry.

Now his elder son was in the field: and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard music and dancing.

And he called one of the servants, and asked what these things meant.

And he said unto him, Thy brother is come; and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound.

And he was angry, and would not go in: therefore came his father out, and entreated him.

And he answering said to his father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee: neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment; and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends:

But as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf.

And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine.

It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found."

A number of years back when I had the good fortune to go to Mar-Lu-Ridge with a bunch of our teenagers, and taught them Bible, I spent three full days during the Bible-teaching period on this parable. Then I surprised them when they came to me for the last session, and I said, "I have a different assignment for you today, one perhaps that you've never encountered before." There were

about 50 in the class. And I said, "I'm going to divide you up into groups of five - ten different clusters. Now you go out for as much time as you may need -- 15, 20, 25 minutes, go to one of these picnic tables, go out on a rock, under a tree, be by yourselves, a little cluster of five.....and during the period of time that you spend together, you reflect upon this Bible passage that deals with three people -- the father and two sons, two sons who were as different as day is different from night. Now you reflect on those three people and you come back and let me know which of those three people -- who among them you would like most to have been . . . "

....now, you think about that, that's a good exercise -- whenever you read a novel or a book, whenever you read a passage in the Bible, it's a salutary thing to try to identify specifically with a particular character....

So they went. They came back.

I'm still trying to figure out how I felt about what they had to tell me. As you might suppose, I had hoped that a high percentage of them would have said they would like very much to have been like the father, because he's the hero in the story, you know. And Jesus particularly told the story because He wanted to use the father as an example of what God's love is like.....

- God is like a waiting father....
- God is like the father of prodigal children....
- God is like the father of those who alienate themselves from one another and from Him....

....I would have been very happy if they would have come back and said, "Pastor, why, no question about it. We'd like to have been like the father -- the forgiving father, the waiting father, the longing father -- the patient father." But much to my surprise, most of them said they would like very much to have been like the prodigal -- the chap who ran away!

Incidentally. I should tell you that once I had a professor who interpreted

the prodigal son for me, this chapter rather, the father and the two sons -- his interpretation had four divisions -- as apt a division, a classification, that I've ever known for this passage of Scripture:

Point One as he thought of this parable, the father and two sons:

Point One: Home

Point Two: Sick of Home

Point Three: Homesick

Point Four: Home

....tells it all, my friend.

So I said, "Tell me now" -- and they did! Most of them wanted to be like the chap that ran away. And I said, "why?"

They were very honest: "It took courage to talk to your father like that -- it took courage to leave home and go out into a place where you'd never been before." They were impressed by that -- it took courage.

Well, for some of us who are older, the older we become the more inclined we are to stay pretty much as we are. This is one of the sad things about growing older, perhaps, the adventurous spirit begins to lag, and I hope as long as I live God will give me a desire to go and to try new territory, to venture forth into strange countries. It can be a very exciting thing, to keep one young in spirit. Poor indeed is that person who so easily settles in where he happens to be.

And I suppose those who are young, not thinking of the price that has to be paid, simply caught up with the assignment of leaving home and getting out on your own....not being aware of the peril and the danger. So they said, "It took courage" . . . and he appealed to them.

I had to give them high marks as they continued to talk because they went on to tell me, it not only took courage to leave home . . . bless their souls, they said it took courage to come back!

And then I began to realize that they were seeing the story as a whole. They

weren't seeing it simply in chapters and parts. They were talking about the boy who took leave from home and then came to his senses and came back -- and had courage enough to admit his failure, had courage enough to want to be re-established in a relationship with his father. So I gave them credit for that.

But now having said that to you, let me also tell you this, that whenever you think of an incident or an event, you must always balance it out as to what might have been. Whatever your condition or circumstance may be right now, you may never really appreciate it until you see it in the light of the alternatives or the options that could have been exercised. And because that happens to be true, let's benefit by what might have been, as someone has said, as far as the prodigal is concerned. We know how the story ends, and we know that it ends happily. But think what might have been.

The prodigal, no matter how courageous he was, they were charitable enough not to have branded him selfish. But the prodigal in the far country might have died in the far country -- he might never have come to his senses. The kind of life that he was living could have taken its toll so easily and so quickly! It might have been that way. Whenever you think of the parable of the Prodigal Son, remember that.

....or, remember this: granted he came to his senses and decided to come back home, by the time he got there his father might have died! -- no one, then, to whom he could have gone....as he was bent to go to his father, the one whom he had wronged, the one into whose life he had introduced so much sorrow and pain. Any number of us know what it is to say to ourselves, if only I had gone sooner! -- there is always the possibility of a thing being too late. This is why some of us become guilt-stricken, when those whom we love die, and time had run out for us before we had gotten around to do all the things that we should have done.

We know how the story ends. But think of how it might have ended -- the prodigal coming back, and no father to receive him.

This, too, needs to be said, and perhaps you've never thought of this. This, too, might have been the story: the prodigal having come back, being re-established in this relationship with his father and knowing what a wonderful thing it is to be forgiven, would have said to himself, "Now that my relationship with my father is re-established, I will go back to the far country and I will make amends for all the wrong that I did there"!

....you can't possibly read this story of the prodigal in the far country without allowing your imagination to run its course and to think of all the hell that he shared in the far country...  
— the women, if you please, that he introduced to a life of shame  
— the boys, perhaps, that he may have taught to steal and to be disrespectful to their parents — this is always a possibility!  
When a person permits himself to be free from restraints of paternal and maternal influence, and lives out his life recklessly in a far country, there is always the possibility of letting hell loose and leaving behind you a train of damaged lives.

Suppose it might have been that way, that he decided to go back to the far country, to try to make amends of all the people that he had hurt or disappointed.....and suppose when he came back, they faced him with bitterness, and hatred. Suppose that's what he would have had to face for the rest of his life.

God may forgive the sinner, but even God can't take away the damage that's done by the sin -- the evil that men do leaves its mark of damage on the fabric of souls and bodies. Did you ever think of that?

Jesus told the story that we might get some reflection, an image of what God is like. He also told the story that we might get some image of ourselves. So I would say to you, now that I've told you the story, now that I've reminded you of this passage of Scripture....suppose I give you the exercise that I gave those youngsters at Mar-Lu-Ridge -- who among the three would you rather have been? And for what reason? And that's something to think about.

(transcribed as received)

"GOD IN SLOW MOTION"

QUIET our minds and hush our hearts, O  
God, and make us ready to give some  
measure of undivided attention to the  
preaching of Your Word, in the name of  
Jesus Christ, who when He came, came  
preaching. Amen.

The sermon bears the title "God In Slow Motion." It's inspired by this particular passage of Scripture, the 17th chapter of the Gospel according to Luke, beginning with the 11th verse:

"And it came to pass, as he went to Jerusalem, that he passed through the midst of Samaria and Galilee.

And as he entered into a certain village, there met him ten men that were lepers, which stood afar off:

And they lifted up their voices, and said, Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.

And when he saw them, he said unto them, Go show yourselves unto the priests. And it came to pass, that, as they went, they were cleansed.

And one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, and with a loud voice glorified God,

And fell down on his face at his feet, giving him thanks: and he was a Samaritan.

And Jesus answering said, Were there not ten cleansed? But where are the nine?

There are not found that returned to give glory to God, save this stranger.

And he said unto him, Arise, go thy way: thy faith hath made thee whole."

Sometimes when I'm alone with a person, I find myself putting an interesting question to that person. Now, you imagine it, if you don't mind -- just the two of us -- you and me -- perhaps in the quiet of your home, or we're walking along a stretch at Hallowood, perhaps walking here in the corridor of Saint Luke somewhere, or maybe you've come to see me, and we alone are in the room.....with no



one else present, I look you straight in the eye and I put a question to you -- a question which at first glance perhaps may surprise you a bit. But then upon reflection you may say to yourself -- 'Just like a preacher to put a question like that!'.....we're alone, just the two of us. On a one-to-one basis I confront you with this question: "Tell me, how are you and the Good Lord getting along?"

It's the ultimate question, you know. For when it's all said and done that's what really matters most. We have been created by God, we're part of His created universe, we're baptized into the Family of God, we're confirmed in the Christian faith, we're meant to be His obedient servants.....now can you understand why I'm constrained on occasion to look you straight in the eye -- as I have done with you, perhaps, -- and you -- and you . . . "how are you and the Good Lord coming along?"

After 40-some years in the ministry, from the vantage-point which God has given me, I have discovered very naturally and very easily, honestly I have, that for any number of people there are certain problem areas in their dealing with God. Really now -- things are not going along as easily as one might wish. There are certain problem areas. So the question can be put: How are you and God coming along?

Would I surprise you that one of the problem areas that I've discovered is this: some people expect God to act sooner than He does! --and always with some flourish, and a bit of the dramatic. That's a problem area for some people. God doesn't act immediately, and God doesn't always act dramatically. And they can't quite figure out why. Because the God of the Scriptures whom they have been led to believe is a God of action, and a God of great capability. What is there that God can't do? And if He can do it -- do it now?

Because we are a family I can tell you this very naturally. It was a week ago tomorrow morning when the phone rang early in the morning....."Pastor, I can't handle it -- I can't cope! I'm afraid I'm going to panic."

....within a reasonable period of time the two of us were seated facing each other. And then it all spilled out -- "I pray, and

I pray, and I pray . . . and nothing happens."

....nothing happens.....nothing happens....nothing happens.....

That's why I bring to your attention this morning the title for this sermon at the very beginning: "GOD IN SLOW MOTION." For while God is always acting, God is always operating, God is always in charge -- God is always doing something ....but sometimes He moves slowly, He acts in slow motion.

That's the thought that's immediately triggered as I read this passage of Scripture, because so frequently when I read a passage of Scripture, one that's quite familiar to us, I ask God to give me a measure of insight that I might not otherwise have. And I can remember throughout these four decades of my ministry when I have preached upon this passage of Scripture I've always dealt with the theme of GRATITUDE AND INGRATITUDE -- ten lepers were healed....only one came back -- nine went merrily on their way, never so much as to come back and say, "Thank you, God -- Thank you, God!"

But this time when I read this passage of Scripture and wrestled with it, it occurred to me that here is something that could speak to those who have this problem area with God, when God sees fit to act slowly -- scarcely perceptible. He can work, you know, in an imperceptible manner. And that may throw some of us for a loop.

I went to Sunday School, of course I did, as a youngster. And I tried to listen to what I was being taught. And I remember how excited I was when on occasion I was taught about the Creation, there in the beginning chapters of Genesis. This happened . . . and then this happened . . . and then this happened -- as though God in Creation was snapping His fingers and presto! -- immediately! -- everything happened fully fashioned.....

.....and I also remember when I would sit on the edge of my chair -- honestly I would -- when my Sunday School teacher would tell me about the miracles -- this dramatic display of God's compassion and power -- how excited I became, to think how maybe I could have been there to see how God im-

mediately did something! Well, the older I've become the more it's become increasingly plain to me that Jesus Christ didn't perform miracles constantly on a 24-hour basis, as though He had a shelf of miracles and His counter was always open, 24 hours of the day, and you only had to ask and you got it!

Remember when I preached that series of sermons for you on the Miracles, I brought to your attention that in the ministry that Jesus performed, we have only about 30 to 35 miracles recorded, which is simply to suggest that He just didn't go about every day performing miracles — they didn't always happen. In fact, the far greater time that He spent with these people He spent preaching and teaching, and praying and nurturing in the faith and building them up. It was only occasionally that He did the so-called dramatic thing. And you and I need to remember this. God doesn't always act immediately. God doesn't always act dramatically — with a great display of power, to overwhelm us. He has on occasion. But like as not He may take His time. And that constitutes a problem area for some of you. Yes it does!

When this sermon was preached at the earlier hour, the gentleman who shook my hand at that door said, "Pastor, I know what you're talking about." And then I thought to myself when he said what he did, as though he were holding a stop-watch on God, when he said, "Pastor, would you believe it, it took five years and seven months to answer one of my prayers!"

Now for this passage of Scripture. There were ten who came, and all ten were cleansed, all ten were healed. The older I become — I'm happy to tell you this — I think this is a true statement . . . I'm less inclined to pass judgment on people. And happily so, I've become more charitable. Which leads me to tell you that I'm not finding fault for the moment with the nine who didn't turn back to give thanks — because I think they were suffering from a problem area with God, wittingly or unwittingly. When they came to be healed and to be cleansed, they expected it to happen immediately, and dramatically. And it didn't.

That's why with pencil in hand, when you read this passage of Scripture you

would do well to underline again and again, and maybe three times:

"Go your way," said Jesus.....and as they went, they were cleansed.  
It did not happen immediately. It did not happen dramatically. Only as they followed the directive to go back to familiar places, to see familiar faces, and to become part of the ordinary daily routine, which is the last place where some people expect God to act at all.

For shame upon you and me, my friend, when we think that God holds court, if you please, only within the shadow of an altar. as though God deals only in grace when we find ourselves in a place such as this. Oh, you know that I honestly believe that God reserves a kind of blessing that otherwise is not known only as we come to a place such as this. But don't rule out God's action -- out there -- in the arena of life, where we have to live and love and labor, routinely. "Go your way," said Jesus.....and He did not snap His fingers. They were not healed dramatically, they were not healed immediately. God chose to act that day in slow motion.

But God be praised, one of them, however, happened to make note of the fact that something had happened as he was going his way, that he found himself caught up in the routine and maybe in the monotonous, as he followed the directive -- it happened -- and he became aware of it. I implore you with all the strength that my soul can command to be made sensitive to God at work in the scarcely perceptible. Give yourself a chance to allow God to work in you day by day, week by week, month by month.

This is where we have to fault some of ourselves. Some of us have to fault ourselves at this point. We're blind to the fact that God wants to take a little time to accomplish what needs to be accomplished in our lives.

Leslie Weatherhead, a great British preacher, used to tell the story about a woman who came to Christ under his preaching. And he was aware of it. And he was thrilled to see how God would be at work in her life. But would you believe it -- six weeks after she was so-called converted she came back and she said,

"I'm going to give it all up, Dr. Weatherhead — it's not going as quickly and as well as I thought it would. I have a terrible time with my tongue, and it's not easy for me to curb my thoughts. I'm not making the progress as a Christian that I thought I would make. I'm going to give it up — I think I will!"

...six weeks...a young Christian...she foolishly permitted

herself to think that she'd have a permanently affixed halo....

Any saint that I've ever known has discovered that that halo has a way of falling off of our heads, and again and ever so often we have to pick them up and straighten them out a bit . . . six weeks — and she wanted to be a fully-blown saint, and she wasn't.....

He counseled her as best he could, and then he received a second caller within a half-hour — a man who came in and said, "Would you please accept a special offering for your work? -- this is in pure gratitude for a daughter of mine who became a convert to the Christian faith under your preaching. There's a change setting in her life and I'm aware of it." The man was the father of the girl who had just gone from Dr. Weatherhead's study. She could not see how God was at work in her life. But He was.

Wouldn't it be a very salutary thing if you and I would ask God to give us the grace to be able to see how He is at work in people's lives, even if we can't see how He is at work in our life? Remember, and remember it well, He's always at work. But not always dramatically, not always immediately. Allow Him, according to His wisdom, to be the God-of-Slow-Motion.....

....and that's something to think about.....

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(this sermon transcribed as recorded)

"HOW TO HANDLE WHAT OTHER  
PEOPLE SAY ABOUT YOU"

O GOD, We make so little time to do this sort of thing, to give some measure of undivided attention to Your Holy Word. Grant now that by Your Holy Spirit we may respond to that which will be interpreted. Through Jesus Christ Thy Son our Lord, who when He came, came preaching.  
Amen.

Every now and then it becomes increasingly apparent to me that any number of people appreciate what I am pleased to refer to as a "How To - " sermon, such as: "How To Handle Guilt"....

"How To Handle Frustration"....

"How To Handle Failure"....

"How To Handle Grief".....

Perhaps one of these days I'll gather a measure of courage, mounting these steps that lead to the sacred desk, to preach a series of sermons on such themes. For our purpose this morning, let me invite you at once to this subject: "How To Handle What Other People Say About You."

It does happen, you know, people will talk. And you could be the subject, and not always will they talk complementarily about you, nor of me. And when that does happen, what then? As a Christian, how does one respond when evil rumors spread?

Every sermon that's preached from this sacred desk must be rooted and grounded in Scripture. Here is the passage of Scripture that serves as the inspiration for today's sermon -- in the staid classic English of the King James translation. You may be hard pressed at first to discover why such a passage of Scripture should serve as the basis for a subject: "How To Handle What Other People Say About You"....but listen carefully.

The Sportie Paul, the itinerant one, the tent-stender-turned-preacher, wrote to these Christians in the wicked city of Corinth at least two letters. By the time he got to the 6th chapter of the second letter he had to let it spill out. He knew very well what people were talking about him -- the ugly, the unkind and the untrue thing was being said. So he responds:

"By honest and dishonest, by evil report and good reports; as deceivers, and yet true;  
as unknown, and yet well known; as dying,  
and behold, we live; as chastened, and not killed;  
as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor,  
yet making many rich; as having nothing, and  
yet possessing all things . . ."

Honestly now, what he's saying there -- "These are the things that people are saying about me and this is the way I'm going to respond."

People will talk. And sooner or later you will be crippled by it, per-  
chance. Would you believe me if I were to tell you that once in my ministry I laid to rest a person who simply could not handle the ugly rumors that spread about him. He didn't know how to manage it, he simply could not cope with it. It killed him; that's exactly what it did. And for those of us who knew him, we had no other explanation for his death.

Because of that I can't come to you this morning in all honesty and say, 'Pay no attention to it -- it doesn't really matter what people say about you' ....it does matter. It can be crippling. It can be defeating. It could kill you. When it's ugly, when it's unkind, when it's untrue -- how does one respond?

You begin by recognizing the fact, of course, that it's going to happen. And there may be nothing in the world that you and I may be able to do about it. It's happened to other people -- it happened to me. And when it does, again let the question be raised -- how does a Christian respond? How does a Christian handle what other people say about him?

This is intended to be a very simple sermon about a not-so-simple subject. One could say three things at the very beginning. It does matter. And what matters most is the way I respond to it -- not what is said, but what I make of what's been said.

We do respond, you know. I have yet to meet her; I'm looking forward some day to meeting her. She's a 17-year-old in a suburb of Denver, Colorado. I had occasion to talk with her the other day. Her name is Stephanie. When she responded to the telephone call as I wanted to talk to somebody else in the family, I was immediately impressed by the quality of her voice, and the compassion and the concern that she had for me, a person placing a call that she had never met, knew nothing about, except that I wanted to talk with another member of the household....

...I immediately complimented her on her manner and her mood in handling that telephone conversation.....

When I met her mother, she said, "You will never know what you did for my daughter! It was just the boost that she needed that day, to receive the compliment which so graciously and generously gave her."

You know what I'm talking about, don't you? You'll hear it tomorrow morning -- you say something kind to somebody, something very complimentary, and chances are -- I can hear it now: "You've made my day!" It does matter what people say about us, and to us.

And by the same token, let somebody say something that's unkind, ugly and untrue, and you'll be crippled. There are times when I cross the threshold of the parsonage and Winifred looks at me as soon as I come home, and she says -- "Now what?" . . . the look of the defeated and one suffering from despair. It does make a difference, and you can't say that it doesn't! But what's more important than anything else is how I respond to what's been said -- even though it is ugly, untrue and unkind.



Let me suggest several things:

One - respond if you can with a measure of good humor. That's always a saving grace. Now, that's easier said than done. And sometimes we see it only after the event: -- weeks and months and perhaps years pass, and then we can look back and say, "If only I could have responded with a bit of humor, it would have saved me a great deal."

You know by this time, after having stood at this desk for 25 years I've become somewhat transparent to you. I remember some years back, when a man came into my office and said, "I think you ought to resign this pastorate -- it's too big for you, you can't handle it."

....it was a critical period, and nobody knows how hard I was working, nobody knows, perhaps, aside from Minifred and David, how much I want to be a good pastor and how much I want to offer a good day's work to my Lord with you and not shun the responsibility which God has given to me....I knew all of this.... But when he said to me what he did, I was crippled by the fact that I was infuriated, and I thought it was unfair, and unkind.....and that's the way I responded -- infuriated.

You know what I should have done when he said to me, "You ought to resign -- the job's too big for you?" I should have said:

"Shhh -- don't tell anybody! Don't let the word  
get out! I thought I was the only one who knew!"

....it would have been far better for me. So perchance when people do say what you may think is unkind, and because you're protecting your own ego, you believe it unfair, and untrue, it could hold us in good stead to respond, if at all possible, with a bit of humor.

Secondly in this sermon that's meant to be very simple about an unsimple matter, let me suggest that you respond as honestly as you can. Honestly in this way: be honest with yourself. You cannot control what other people say. You cannot go freely

through this world slapping people in the mouth and forcing their lips to be sealed so they never say anything about you. That can't happen, because people will talk -- begin on that premise. You may even go so far as to be the kind of person who in Richard Brinsley Sheridan's "School For Scandal" and the woman is about to leave a group of women with whom she had been for about an hour, and she takes an early departure -- realistically as she goes she stands at the door and then turns and says, "I go -- but I leave my reputation behind me." There is always the possibility. So respond with all the honesty that you can muster. This could happen.

And just as honest with yourself, it could happen because down deep inside of us there could be a bit of prejudice....and sometimes people will say the unkind, the ugly and the untrue because they're prejudiced in relationship to us. There is something about us that they don't quite like. There may be something in our manner, there's something in our mood, there's something in our chemistry. It can happen. Let's respond honestly to this. There is this possibility, and for that reason.

You remember the old nursery rhyme:

"I do not like you, Dr. Fell;  
The reason why I cannot tell.  
But this I know, and know full well,  
I do not like you, Dr. Fell."

....there are people like that who will respond to us like that.

You may not control what people say about you, even though it is ugly, untrue and unkind, but we are held responsible as to how we respond to what's said. Which leads me to say to you, it may be helpful sometimes to recognize that when people say the untoward thing about us, they may say it out of ignorance -- they simply don't know the whole story. And I suppose that's one of the things that vexes me a great deal when I have to deal with people who have not been part of a process that's leading to a conclusion. And because they haven't been going to all that has gone on and then they make premature judge-

ment -- because they don't know, people may say the unfair, the ugly and the unkind and the untrue -- respond in that manner.

And of course I'm fully conscious of the fact that it was this kind of thing that did our Blessed Lord in. How can you be insensitive to His dying upon the cross without hearing that cry, "Father, forgive them" -- Why? -- " . . because they don't know." But that doesn't mean that the damage is less severe. How to handle this kind of thing?

In conclusion I need to remind you that there are three other things we need to keep in mind: what I think of myself, and what I say of myself is terribly, terribly important, far more important than what other people say about me. William Hocking used to say that down deep inside of us there is the tendency to become the kind of person we think ourselves to be. And fortunate is that person who, when he wrestles with this kind of thing, can keep his sanity and is strengthened and sustained by what the poet referred to:

"He who would climb and soar aloft,  
Must ever keep alive within his soul  
The tonic of a wholesome pride."

And yet that has to be balanced.

I told you -- #1: Humor

#2 Respond with honesty

#3 Respond with humility.

Why should I think that everyone would always think well of me? I am a sinful, disobedient child of God, and as the Lesson Reader read for you today in the Epistle:

" The good that I would do, I don't do;  
and the evil that I despise, I find  
myself doing. Who can free me from  
this sort of thing? . . "

If Jesus Christ could not escape being the subject of the unkind, the untrue and the ugly, who am I, then, to think that I could?

But now having said that, let me go back. It is important what people say

about you. But far more important is what you say about yourself.

And even greater than that is what you hear God saying about you.

God says, "You are my child -- I have made you in my image"

God says, "I will never leave you, I will never forsake you"

God says, "There's always something that you can do for me."

I still get a thrill when I see our confirmands standing at the back of the Nave before they walk the sacred aisle and stand within the shadow of the holy altar, when the question is put to them:

"Tell me, you who are about to be confirmed -- what do you believe about Jesus Christ?"

and they answer in concert:

"I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, Son of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary . . . has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, saved me at great cost, freed me from sin, death and the power of the devil . . . that I may be His own, live under Him in His kingdom, and serve Him with everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness, just as He has risen from the dead and lives and rules eternally . . . This is most certainly true."

I must constantly remind myself what it is that God thinks of me. And that's what really matters most.

We happen to have a God who never, never gives up, on any one of us . . . and that's a happy thought.

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(this sermon transcribed as recorded)

"HOW TO HANDLE WHAT YOU  
SAY TO YOURSELF"

GRACE, Mercy and peace from God our  
Father and from His Son Jesus Christ,  
our Blessed Lord. Amen.

Last Sunday's sermon was entitled "How To Handle What Other People Say About You." Today's sermon is a sequel-of-sorts. Not "How To Handle What Other People Say About You" -- but rather -- "HOW TO HANDLE WHAT YOU SAY TO YOURSELF." It's a salutary thing, you know, honestly it is, to find yourself talking to yourself. The older I become the more I find myself doing this sort of thing, and I think it's profitable. Winifred, she's not so sure, because when I do it verbally she takes it as a sign of increasing senility.

What you're about to hear is inspired by a particular passage of Scripture, which remains for many of us a very popular parable that Jesus spoke. In fact it's in the 15th chapter of the Gospel according to Luke, and some people say that there are three stories there all put together, or maybe four. Jesus is telling the story about a man who had two sons, one stayed home...the other couldn't possibly stay home. He couldn't wait until he could turn his back and go out for himself and live independently, albeit recklessly. You remember the story, don't you? -- you have a name for it: The Parable of The Prodigal Son.

As I read that passage of Scripture repeatedly, I find myself instinctively underlining one passage in particular, the 17th verse of the 15th chapter of the Gospel according to Luke:

"And when he came to himself, he said . . ."

What do you suppose he said? Really doesn't make too much difference, as far as he's concerned. It's simply for us to realize that this was the turning point in his life. If ever he rose to his full stature, if ever he began to be all

that he was meant to be, it was, I suggest to you, precisely at that moment -- when he began speaking to himself, when he began giving himself a good earfull.

One of these things about speaking to oneself is this: that usually we listen when we're talking to ourselves. I may have a way of tuning other people out when they start speaking to me -- you do that, some of you might be doing it right now! -- occasionally we can throw ourselves into neutral and not much pay attention to what other people are saying. But chances are when we speak to ourselves we listen.

And that's why, I dare say, this sermon is important. Because when it's all said and done, what other people may say to us may be important, but not nearly as important as what we say to ourselves. Because essentially our path in life is determined by the way we size the situation up, analyze it, and draw our own conclusion and speak either comfortably, courageously or cowardly to ourselves.

What do you say to yourself when you speak to yourself? How do you handle it? May I surprise you a bit when I say it all depends on the direction in which you are facing. We say different things according to the direction we face. If I turn my back to you and look away from you, I may say certain things to myself that I might not say if I were facing you directly. Let me suggest it to you this way: how to handle what I say to myself -- notice again, it's not what I say about myself -- may be determined very largely by the direction I face.

As an example, I say certain things to myself when I'm looking backward that I'm not so sure that are always very healthy. And that's why it's terribly important as to how you handle what you say to yourself.

Sometimes when I look backward I romanticize the past, I foolishly allow myself, and please forgive me now, I'm talking about a chapter in my life that's over, I think. I romanticize the past and think. "Those were the better days."

All of us reach a certain stage in life when we say, "the good old days -- the golden days, the glorious days that have come and gone" . . . and as soon as we say 'come and gone' we allow ourselves to believe that it's a chapter that's over, never again to be repeated, and nothing in the present and nothing in the future will ever be as grand or as good. Be very careful what you say to yourself when you think about the past, when you look backward.

As a Christian I'm not so sure that you ought ever to allow yourself to think that the best is over. As a Christian, with God the best is yet to come. Isn't that why we prize Heaven? and the prospect of another day -- hopefully that it could be better? Aren't we meant to believe that with God His purpose is to be increasingly fulfilled in our lives? I have to be very careful with myself when I start talking to myself when I'm looking backward & as though every wonderful thing that God ever had in mind for me has already happened. I'm not so sure that I'd want to go on living if I believed that to be true. But unwittingly, unconsciously, I can permit myself at times to think that.

That's why, please don't misunderstand me now -- I place a great value on the Scriptures -- you know that I do. And every sermon that I want to preach to you, I want to preach as a sermon that's rooted and grounded in the Scriptures. But be very careful, my friend, as though you permit yourself to think that all the good and wonderful things that God ever did He did only as they're recorded within the confines of these covers.

Sometimes we talk about the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob, as though God was only up to something wonderful in those days.....and sometimes when we read the New Testament we get all excited about the wonderful things that happened when Jesus was here on earth -- we even sing a hymn, "I Wish That I Could Have Been With Him Then". The older I get, the more grateful I am that I'm with Him now, with all the wonderful things He's accomplished since the New Testament era.

And in a certain sense when you talk about the Book of the Acts of The Apostles, you and I are writing the modern-day chapter of the Book of the Acts of the Apostles. Halford Luccock, a professor at Yale and a Biblical scholar, used to talk about the "haze of distance" -- as though when you look back there's an undiluted radiance that belongs to the past. You have to be very careful of that.

I think he went on to cite two examples --

-- the Psalmist, with poet's blood coursing through his veins, looks back upon the exodus and says, "Then the Lord took His chosen people into the freedom with a shout and with great joy" . . . as though it was one continuous happy experience....

....you also read in the Scriptures: "Then the Children of Israel murmured" -- they did not behave very politely, they did not behave very gallantly.....

"Then the children of Israel turned against Moses and Aaron saying, "Would to God we had died in the wilderness, where at least we had food."

The going was tough, you say, as they entered the promised land. You must be very careful how you romanticize the past.

I have mixed feelings about people who take my heroes of other generations and take them from their pedestals. I need heroes in my life. I have lived long enough to know that every hero has his feet of clay, but I don't want them to crumble too easily before my eyes. But even that serves a purpose, for the giants in those days were still human, and they had to struggle and they had to persevere, and sweat it out.

Nothing ever drops down fully fashioned from Heaven. So when I begin to talk to myself and I look backward, I have to be very careful how I handle



what I say to myself, lest I romanticize the past unduly.

How do I handle what I say to myself in the present moment? You see, this whole business of talking to yourself depends upon the tense: past tense -- present tense. Your situation in the present moment could not be a very desirable one, could not be a very happy one. How do you handle what you say to yourself, granted now it's extremely difficult and unfortunate?

Well, take for example the Prodigal Son. When he began to speak to himself and size the situation up, it wasn't a very happy thing that he had on his hands. He was a wastrel wanderer, that's what he was, and wanton, too. Not a very pleasant prospect on his hands....

...that blush of youth had disappeared by a dissipated life --

he had absolutely nothing -- that's what he looked at that day....

What do you say to yourself when you find yourself in such a situation? How do you handle what you say in the face of a difficult present moment? -- unavoidable....inescapable? Do you look yourself in? Do you stop at that moment?

Didn't I read the other day about a preacher and his wife who went on their once-in-a-lifetime journey to the West, and somewhere as they were traveling along he discovered the thing that you and I dread: his money was missing. That roll of bills that he had put together, he thought he had it secretly pocketed. It wasn't there. He went through every article of clothing. He couldn't find it. They unpacked every suitcase, went through his briefcase, got down on their hands and they looked in the car, on the floor, underneath the seats -- took the seats out -- in every crevice. Nowhere could it be found.

....and then he records how they spent their time lamenting the dilemma of the present situation....until finally his wife spoke up and said, "Is this the way it has to be? Why don't we get on, and move away from this!"

....is that the way you talk to yourself when you find the present moment uneasy?

ugly, difficult? Happy indeed is that person who knows how to handle what he's saying to himself in a situation like that.

Or perhaps it's just the opposite: the blossoming of a precious experience, a new joy. What do you say to yourself when you're experiencing this? Well, you say to yourself, I will cherish it, and prize it forever, and build upon it and never again become discouraged -- because I have seen this glory! I once read about a person who said his life could never again grow dim because of one sunrise that he had experienced.

How do you handle what you say to yourself when you face the future? Ah, there you have something! It's yet to be written. You don't have a single fact with which to deal as far as tomorrow is concerned. It hasn't yet come. When you talk to yourself, will you be crippled, will you victimize yourself by fear, by the possibility of failure, by the possibility of frustration? What do you say to yourself when you talk to yourself about what is yet to come?

Could you say, "Grow old along with me, the best is yet to be --"? Could you say to yourself magnificently, "I do not know what the future has in hand, but I know the one in whose hand the future is held . . . " Do you ever say that to yourself when you talk to yourself about the future? Happy indeed is that person who can. Happy indeed is that person who does.

Let me say it to you again, it's important what other people say to you. But vastly more important is what you say to yourself. For you may take that far more seriously than anything else. And that's an awesome thought! To that end, God gives us the Holy Spirit that we may be enlightened and empowered. This I most certainly believe.

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"HOW TO GET ALONG WITH ONE ANOTHER"  
(Romans 12: 14-18)

GRACE, Mercy and peace from God our  
Father and from His Son Jesus Christ,  
our Blessed Lord. Amen.

Today's sermon bears the title "How To Get Along With One Another" and the passage of Scripture that inspires it is the closing section of the 12th chapter of a letter that the Apostle Paul wrote to Christians who lived in the Imperial City of Rome. Listen to what he had to say to them:

Bless them which persecute you: bless, and curse not.  
Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with  
them that weep.  
Be of the same mind one toward another. Mind not  
high things, but condescend to men of low estate. Be  
not wise in your own conceits.  
Recompense to no man evil for evil. Provide things  
honest in the sight of all men.  
If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live  
peaceably with all men.

With some people it's very easy -- just like two peas in a pod -- get along so easily, so graciously, never so much as an element of strain nor tension. But with other people, it's a different story. How does one master the art of getting along with other people?

Significantly enough, for the Apostle Paul, he recognized that that was a basic problem with human nature. Oh, I should tell you this: he loved to write letters. Some people detest writing letters. It's always a chore. Thank God it was not so with the Apostle Paul. He wrote letters right and left, to those wonderful Christian congregations that he had organized. He kept in touch with them. And as we read many of the letters that he wrote, we have an appreciation not only for what the situation was in that day but also he's given us a tremendous dose of good theology, because whatever he had to say, he always said it from the Christian perspective.

Occasionally he'd speak in a very down-to-earth fashion, just as these words

that I read for you flow so easily from his lips and from his pen...."This is how you ought to get along with one another -- as best you can - - "

...he was a realist -- "If at all possible, live peaceably with all men...."  
....if at all possible. Sometimes it just can't be done.

I once had a very good friend, and I said to him, "Tell me, have you always been able to work with people?" He said, "I've learned the lesson early in my career - - there are some people with whom you can work -- no question about it. Notice," he said, "how I'm saying this -- there are some people with whom you can work.....then there is that kind of person around whom you have to work. The job has to be done, and in order to get it done you might be able to work with some people. But then there is that kind of person, in order to get the job done you've got to work around that person . . . " A lesson worth remembering.

And happily enough, when he told me that, there was no element of the distasteful in his voice, it was a realistic appraisal. For in doing that, unwittingly he was laying down a fundamental ground rule by which he accepted the fact that not all people are the same, and some people are different because of their temperament and because of their personality. And let me suggest to you as this sermon unfolds now, a number of things that you may want to keep in mind as you continue to strive to master the art of getting along with people. You begin at this point: you accept the person as he is, you accept the person as she is. You do not press a button and immediately try to re-make that person.

This has been a very difficult thing for some parents that I know. The shock of their life has come when they discover that their children are not exactly as they are.....and occasionally there are some of us who say "Thank God!"

In our relationship with people it's a very salutary thing to accept the fact that the person has a right to be different, just as I want that person to recognize my right to be different. Well, that's Point Number One: Do not assume that this person with whom you are going to work is going to be an exact

carbon copy of the kind of a person you think he ought to be. For each of us brings the limitations of his own strength and his weaknesses, and each of us is also conditioned by the circumstances out of which his character up to that point had been fashioned and the situation of which he has been part. And that's the second thing that needs to be said. We always need to make allowances for the forces and the factors that have been at work in that person's life before you came on the scene.

None of us may fully understand what has been at work in the other person's life. Not everyone has had the advantage, perhaps, that you have had, not everyone's had the optimum situation which you may have known. And as best you can, try to ascertain what those forces and factors have been. The soundest piece of advice that I ever heard given to a school teacher was this: "Learn your pupils before you teach them."

It's perfectly good grammar. The person giving the advice was simply saying, "Know as much as you can about that individual — take time to assess the background from which that person has come."

You know by this time that all other things being equal, I believe in long pastorates. And happy indeed is that congregation that helps make such a thing possible. A long pastorate is more a tribute to the congregation than it is to the pastor himself. But I'm simply saying this to you for the simple reason that after 25 years and observing the scene in Saint Luke, and trying to keep my finger upon your spiritual pulsebeat, I have been able to assess a thing or two that I believe holds me in good stead in whatever ministry God will allow me to continue to give you, because of what you've allowed me to learn about you.

I am in a far better position to deal with a catechumen today than I was the very first year I came to you, by virtue of my relationship and what I've observed, and what, thank God, I've continued to learn! And that's the second thing that you need to keep in mind: Learn as much as you can about the situation

and the person who may have been -- and I use the word advisedly -- victimized by that situation. I'm talking now generally about the person with whom you have to work, where the situation is far from being optimum. That's the burden of the sermon right now.

And who knows what you might be like, had you come out of that situation. So you begin your understanding by accepting that person where that person happens to be. There's no magic button that you can press that will change that situation immediately. And then secondly, make an allowance for the forces and the factors that have created the situation out of which that person comes.

And the third thing -- make allowance for the possibility of change. Do you realize how much harm we do a person sometimes, when we imprison that person into a setting that's been previously fashioned by an earlier relationship that was not very happy? And we never give them credit perhaps for changing.

My heart went out to her -- it might just as well have been the husband who said it - - - "I'm afraid, Pastor, it may be too late, but I've changed! And would to God that he would see that I've changed, but I'm afraid with the passing of these years he's going to be insensitive to the fact that I have . . ." ....as pathetic a thing as I've heard in recent years. Make allowance for the fact that there is always the possibility that a person could change -- this irritating, this annoying person.

Oh, I have to say to you quite parenthetically, there are certain Christians who find it difficult to get along with one another. As proof positive, let me give you this example. I used to go to a machine shop about five miles from the hills of home where we have our little place. It was owned and operated by a friend of Whifred's, a devout Christian, who made it his business to hire only people of Christian persuasion. That's how high a value he placed upon Christian commitment. Twelve people worked for him.

Would you believe me now when I tell you that one of those twelve, when he had his noon break, weather permitting, would always go out to where his car

was parked, and take his dinner pail, and there he would eat his lunch as he tinkered away on his car, even though there was nothing precisely to be done -- just because there was a fellow inside who irritated him and annoyed him and he couldn't stand being around him during the break. And both of them carried the name Christian. It is not always easy.

I think sometimes I would like to have been around when our Lord was here on earth with the twelve disciples. It's a matter of Scriptural record --

"What is it that I heard you say among yourselves  
as you were arguing in the way? . . ."

Even after He had invested three years of His life in them! -- they still bickered as to which one would be more important. Even for Christians it's extremely difficult for some people to get along with one another.

That's why the Apostle Paul could write this letter that he did to these people that he had yet to meet! -- because he knew that people are the same the world over....."And if they expect me to give them Christian advice and counsel, I can do this very easily: If at all possible learn to live with one another peaceably -- get along as best you can."

And the last bit of advice is this: never hesitate to take the initiative, to introduce the element of hope and love, in order to reconcile a situation. Take the initiative -- don't wait for the other person to make the move.

I spoke with her last night long-distance, a good friend of the parsonage family. None of you will recognize it. It all brought back a precious recollection of something she once told me when they were first married. She and her husband had a lovers' quarrel, and in the heat of it she threw the dish cloth on the floor.....and there it remained for five weeks. And you know who picked it up? -- the mother-in-law when she came to visit.....and never so much as said a word. There comes a time in our dealing with one another when somebody has to take the initiative.

Which leads me to say to you with all the strength that I can command,

that's exactly what God did in Jesus Christ - - -

"While we were yet sinners --- ".....unattractive.....

"God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself."

Whatever joy you and I know in our relationship with God we know because God was willing to take the first step. God was willing to take the risk to show Himself kindly disposed toward us, never so much as asking the question:

-- How will they respond?

-- Will it be worth it?

And that's something to keep in mind.

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(This sermon transcribed as recorded)



Sermon - Pastor Raymond Shaheen  
The Tenth Sunday of Pentecost - August 16, 1981

"GOD - THE BANQUET-GIVER"  
(Luke 14:12-24)

GRACE, mercy and peace from God  
our Father and from His Son Jesus  
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

It's a salutary truth that ought not to be ignored that some of the most wonderful teaching situations that ever occurred in the life of Jesus Christ occurred and took place aside from a formal worship setting. This statement is being made as precisely as it's being made for the simple reason that occasionally we have a way of permitting ourselves to think that only the so-called religious occurs on so-called holy ground and within hallowed walls. Wherever a person may be, he may find an opportunity to have there a pulpit by which to speak and interpret God's truth. And sometimes that can come in unexpected places and in the most extraordinary of circumstances.

Why do I say that to you? For the simple reason that I can say it to you on good authority as you listen to this passage of Scripture: -- mark you, a tremendous truth is being shared by Jesus Christ, a sermon is being preached, a point is being made, consciences are being pricked, and people are being motivated as the God-factor, the eternal dimension is being introduced. And all this is happening . . . not within a setting such as this! Now keep that in mind as this passage of Scripture is read:

"Then said he also to him that bade him, When thou makest a dinner or a supper, call not thy friends, nor thy brethren, neither thy kinsmen nor thy rich neighbors; lest they also bid thee again, and a recompence be made thee.  
But when thou makest a feast, call the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind;  
And thou shalt be blessed; for they cannot recompense thee:  
for thou shalt be recompensed at the resurrection of the just.  
And when one of them that sat at meat with him heard these things, he said unto him, Blessed is he that shall eat bread in the kingdom of God.  
Then said he unto him, A certain man made a great supper, and bade many:  
And sent his servant at supper time to say to them that were bidden, Come; for all things are now ready.

And they all with one consent began to make excuse. The first said unto him, I have bought a piece of ground, and I must needs go and see it; I pray thee have me excused.

And another said, I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to prove them: I pray thee have me excused.

And another said, I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.

So that servant came, and shewed his lord these things. Then the master of the house being angry said to his servant, Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in hither the poor, and the maimed, and the halt, and the blind.

And the servant said, Lord, it is done as thou hast commanded, and yet there is room.

And the lord said unto the servant, Go out into the highways and the hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled.

For I say unto you, That none of those men which were bidden shall taste of my supper."

Let's get it in proper perspective. Jesus was invited one time to have dinner with a group of people.

The man who invited him presumably was a very wealthy person. Now get this straight: Jesus is the guest, He is the invited one. And any number among you knows and knows very well that guests ought to behave very properly, and with due and very proper regard for their host, and to do what they can to maintain the kind of tenor that ought to prevail graciously -- not create waves, don't rock the boat. But are you ready now? I'm wondering, if Jesus was ever invited back to that place again....because if you want to make bold, you could establish the point that He did not behave very graciously, at least in the eyes of some people.

For as He sat down to eat, He looked around, He sized up the situation -- not so much concerned with the food that was on the table, not so much concerned with the physical setting of the place -- but the kind of people who were there -- well-groomed, I presume, fairly well stationed in life, and for the most part people who had fairly well arrived. . . . all of them decent, clean-looking -- the kind of group in which undoubtedly you'd be honored to be found. And then Jesus made a very shocking statement. He turned to His host, to the man who had invited Him to the dinner, and He said: (well, let me give it to you as recklessly and as freely as I can) "You've got the wrong people here! These aren't the kind of people you ought to invite to a dinner such as this! In all likelihood when you invited these people you had in mind, perhaps, that they'd invite you in return." (You do that sort of thing,

don't you, come now, when you make up your invitation list? You're either re-paying a dinner invitation that you'd responded to previously, or perhaps you're inviting people that in turn maybe some day they might invite you to their place - - )

...Jesus said to His host, "You've got the wrong people here! You've gone about this in the wrong way! If you're going to have a festive occasion, you ought to invite people who can't possibly do this kind of thing in return for you. If you want to be generous, be generous in that way. If you want to be considerate, have that kind of person in mind."

Now a very awkward situation developed. You can imagine yourself as the guest, and for another guest alongside of you perhaps speak a word such as this to your host. Both of you are guests, and the friend alongside of you has now created a very awkward, embarrassing situation. And knowing you as I do, in all likelihood you would have done exactly what one of these fellows did: he tried to change the subject, he tried to ease the situation by trying to talk about something -- well let's say ethereal. And he said, "It must be wonderful thing to break bread in the kingdom of Heaven."

...and then again Jesus behaves in a very unexpected way by turning to the man who said that - - "That's what you think! Let me tell you a story. Listen to me . . . "

And then Jesus spoke this parable, about a man who made a banquet, gave a great feast, and invited many people. And when the time came to sit down to eat, not a single person who had been invited showed up! Oh, they were polite, no question about that! Each had sent his excuse, which he had justified in his own eyes. And as far as the invited guest was concerned, it seemed a very reasonable thing to him that he could ask to be excused. And then Jesus went on to say that the man who had invited people to come was so infuriated that he said, "My table has been spread; the food will not go to waste -- somebody's going to eat it." And he sent his servants out to invite anybody that could be found. So far so good, you say.

When I was a youngster I always enjoyed stories that ended happily. I'm not so sure that this story ends happily, from a child's point of view, because Jesus said that the man who invited people and they didn't show up, then saw that the food was spread nonetheless, and guests would come. But He said of the original ones -- "Not a single one of them will be invited again -- none of them will taste of my supper." That doesn't end on a very happy note.

Now let's go back to what I said to you at the beginning. Here is Jesus, interpreting a fundamental truth of the basic nature and character of God -- not as He stands at a pulpit such as this, but in this unlikely setting, when He's a dinner guest, with people around Him. You must also make note of the fact, and make note

of it very earnestly, that He spoke the truth, He was constrained to do it, no matter where He was found, no matter where He went -- He was in duty bound to deal with the eternal dimension, the God-factor. Now that's the first thing with which I ask you to wrestle as the sermon continues to unfold.

As one who knows something of God's love and God's truth -- do you find yourself prepared and so constrained to share it and to speak it, no matter where you may be? Or do you unwittingly allow yourself to believe that you talk about God only in a place such as this? - - or you think about God only as soon as somebody says, "Now let us pray" ? With all the strength that my soul can command I urge you to think of the way in which Jesus introduced the Eternal Dimension -- the God-Perspective, as He broke bread with people.

It also leads me to say, as excitingly as I can, have done with the notion that you have to have a hymn-book in your hand, a prayer book in the other hand, or an altar in front of you, or a Bible to which you can turn, before you can do anything in the name of God. Don't misunderstand me, I place a high value upon the thing that's happening right now! And you know very well that after a quarter-of-a-century of sharing a life with you, that nothing that we do is more important than when we gather for worship. It remains central in our life. Let it be said repeatedly -- nothing is more important than the worship encounter such as this. But -- I need to say this as quickly as I can -- this is not the only place where God is to be dealt with and His truth and love to be shared. In fact, we may do it here in order to do it elsewhere.

Which leads me to remind you that there are some of you who feel that you can't do much for God because you can't sing...you can't play...you can't teach...you can't bake beans....you can't bake bread....you can't type a letter...you can't make a call...you can't serve on a committee - - - you feel you lack leadership qualities. There are so many things that you say you can't do because you lack these qualities. Now get ready for this: I'm a fervent believer that God gives to every one of us a built-in opportunity every time we sit down to eat. For as we break bread together there are certain things we do for God with a fork and a spoon in our hand that we may not otherwise be able to do for Him.

I subscribe wholeheartedly to the principle that important as the food may be that you consume when you eat, far more important may be the conversation that takes place as you break bread with one another. I'm profoundly grateful to God that I stem from Near-Eastern stock, for the people in that part of the world always made much of breaking bread together -- the sharing of hospitality, the identifying with another person, relating to another person. That's why I'm excited as I am when I share this passage of Scripture with you now, when Jesus was enunciating this fundamental truth regarding

the basic nature and character of God -- He did it as He was breaking bread.

Now before I turn my back upon this pulpit and walk away from it---what now was it at this particular time that He was sharing with them as part of the basic nature and character of God? - - It is obvious, my friend. God is like a great banquet-giver;

-- God is like someone who wants to spread a bounteous table, good things

-- God is like a person who takes the initiative and He says,

"Now you come. I want you to be present."

You don't have to ask Him. He does the asking.

One of the Christian truths that we cherish is that God is kindly-disposed toward us, and God is always taking the initiative. God's always beckoning us in His direction. God's always the one who speaks the inviting word: "Come! . . . Come!...Come!" ...and then I have to say just as quickly as I can -- and what He offers is always a very satisfying thing. One is properly nourished at the Table of the Lord, one can be deeply satisfied there.

After spending four decades in the ministry, my heart bleeds for people who are suffering from spiritual malnutrition. On the street on which we used to live in South Williamsport, Pennsylvania, not long after we moved away I was told of a person on that street who had died. Would you believe me if I were to tell you that they said she died of malnutrition -- in this day and age! She lived alone. Maybe she never quite prepared the kind of food that she should have prepared for herself. But I also know the kind of person that she was. She lived alone, she ate alone, she died alone ....from malnutrition.

Anyone who eats at the table of the Lord is given a solid diet, and satisfying. This I most certainly believe.

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(Transcribed as recorded)

Sermon - Pastor Raymond Shaheen  
The Eleventh Sunday After Pentecost - August 23, 1981

"WHEN GOD MAKES MUCH OF LITTLE"

GRACE, Mercy and peace from God  
our Father and from His Son Jesus  
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

In the first church in which I ever worshiped in London I was impressed by a number of things. One specifically, that in the pew rack in front of me I found not only the hymnal, I found not only the prayer book. I also found a copy of the Scriptures. And I knew a measure of great delight when the Lessons were being read, how the people around me instinctively reached for the Bible, and without any difficulty at all on their part were able to find the place, the passage that was being announced...and they followed closely as the Scriptures were read. So great a regard did that congregation have for the Bible.

You ought to know, without any criticism of you at all, that I'm being told increasingly, wherever people go to the sacred desk to preach a sermon, that they run an obstacle course-of-sorts. There was a day, you see, when the text was announced, that most of the people in the congregation had some familiarity with that passage of Scripture, and that the preacher when he was about to preach his sermon, could easily assume that every one of his hearers was acquainted with that passage of Scripture. They tell me this is not so any longer, and that no preacher dare assume when he goes to the sacred desk that as soon as he announces the text, that every single person will have some familiarity regarding it.

If that should be true, why should it be true? Why can people say that the Bible is a book that everyone owns, and nobody reads? I don't think that's a fair statement, because I'm not convinced that everybody owns a copy of the Scriptures, and I do know very well that there are people such as you who do read the Bible and who live by its precepts and who are drawn closer to Jesus Christ because of the regard that they have for the sacred writings. But the question remains: Why don't people read the Bible more than they do?

I've asked that question repeatedly, as you might know that I would, and I think that I've come up with three answers that people have given me -- such as you, perhaps.

One -- The Scriptures are written in a language that's hard to understand.

Well, I'm happy to tell you, translators have recognized that, and in recent years we have a plethora of translations in contemporary

language. Even the passage of Scripture that Dr. Hesse read for you today from the lectern, he read from a translation that we did not use fifteen years ago. And I happen to have in front of me now, if we had time -- how I could read for you that same passage in even more understandable and readable English.

So, if you're numbered among those who say, "I don't read the Bible because I'm hung up with the give and the giveths, and the show and the showeths, and the thees and the thous -- -- it is possible to read the Scriptures today in today's English. So don't hide behind that one.

Secondly -- There are people who tell me they don't read the Scriptures because there's so much in the Scriptures that deal with the miracles, and they have a great deal of trouble with miracles.

They just can't believe that miracles can happen because they're scientifically oriented, they know specifically there must be a cause before there can be an effect -- that this has to lead to that. And we're so oriented these days that we need to have things quite feasible in front of us: 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - 8 - 9, and then 10... but before we say 10 we say all of these 9 things beforehand.

But when you deal with a miracle, that's something different. And so there are people who don't even open the Bible, because the Bible records miracles, and they just don't accept the fact that miracles can happen, because they don't understand them.

There's still another reason why some people don't read the Scriptures -- it's because they have yet to experience the need that's met by the Scriptures. Now what do I mean by that?

"In my Father's house there is a place for you." Some people never appreciate that until death has removed from their circle someone they love. I once met a man who said that he and his family had lived on the south side of the river for years, and he never much thought about people who lived on the north side of the river until one of his daughters got married, and they moved away and they established their residence over there. By the same token, he said, "Pastor, I never much thought about Heaven until one of my family died and went to Heaven -- then I began to think in terms of Heaven." There are some people who never quite appreciate what's in the Scriptures because life has never brought them to that critical moment when they have nothing to lean on except: "The eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms."

There are some people who get along in life swimmingly until something happens over which they have no control, and for which seemingly they have no resources that are adequate enough. Then they begin to appreciate what's always been here:

"I will never leave you . . . I will never forsake you."

Several of those people who were held hostage in Iran were reared and trained in the Lutheran faith. Some of them are going around now speaking of the great value that they placed upon their Confirmation experience, and how much they owed to what they had memorized -- which in the dark hour held them in good stead.

Well, all that I'm saying to you now is prefatory to the sermon that you're about to hear, a sermon that's based upon today's Gospel lesson, a passage of Scripture which is the record of a miracle. And I'm speaking as earnestly as I can to you now because I don't want you to be turned off....because it is a miracle. Yet there is a tremendous truth inherent in this account that Dr. Hesse read for us from the 14th chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew. Incidentally, it's the one miracle performed by Jesus that's been reported by every single Gospel writer . . . and that's reason enough, then, why you ought not to ignore it. You ought to stick with it and try to understand it as best you can. And that's the purpose of this sermon this morning.

Now, let me remind you of the incident. It was the year of His great popularity. No matter where He went throngs were present, He was the great preacher who gave them unforgettable pictures of God -- who, more than one person, when He was finished preaching, would put his finger reverently to his lips and whisper the name of God! That's exactly what Jesus Christ was able to do when He preached. And they came by the hundreds, they came by the thousands. They were captivated, as well they should have been, and they stayed there while He preached.

And then after He had preached for a while, one of the disciples discovered that unless they got on their way quickly, these thousands of people, they'd run into some kind of a problem. As one account says, "They would faint by the way -- " because they wouldn't have anything to eat. And he thought it was high time they would go home now, or into the village, where there might be food waiting for them. So the disciples came and said to Jesus, "Send them away! -- Tell them to go home!" . . . as much as to indicate, We've fulfilled our responsibility, we've conducted the church service -- we're not in the restaurant business, we're not in duty bound to do anything other than what we've already done. If they have a problem now, it's their problem, and they ought to deal with it, and to deal with it speedily.... You understand -- that was the situation:       The Great Preacher --

-- thousands of people listening to Him preach



- the people who surrounded Him, aware of a problem:
  - if they don't get on the road, head back home,
  - get to a village, we're going to have a crisis!
  - ...all these people fainting on our hands! Let's
  - get rid of the problem before it reaches any kind
  - of magnitude.....

What does Jesus do? Now understand what we're trying to do -- we're trying to understand what we can understand. And we're in duty bound to do that. Jesus says, "You don't have to send them away. Tell them to stay, and we'll deal with it, we'll help them." Now in case you haven't caught this yet---let me say as quickly as I can and with all the strength that my soul can command -- from the Christian perspective, none of us ever has the right to say, "Your problem is your problem." From the Christian perspective, all of us, once we become aware of another person's problem, we're in duty bound to help to do something about that problem. The Christian understanding of God is that He's a heavenly Father, and a father means a family. And if we call ourselves children of God, then we're all inter-related! If we belong to the same family, then we have a responsibility for one another. This is the Christian perspective!

You see, you thought you had difficulty trying to understand how five loaves and two fishes could be multiplied to feed five thousand people. Watch out now, you may have difficulty in trying to understand what I am saying to you now. It was Mark Twain, you know, who said It wasn't what was in the Bible that he couldn't understand that caused him problems -- it's what he should have understood that gave him the difficulty. And this can cause any number of people a problem, because they don't much want to see the Christian perspective in this way. But when you read the account of this miracle, and it's as clear as today! -- Jesus says, "You don't have to send them away! Together we will help them deal with that problem -- we can do something about it!" God is the supreme optimist -- we can do something about it.

Trying to understand this miracle, let me help you at this point. When you have a problem, it may be in the recognition that the other person's problem is your problem too. None of us can ever allow himself the luxury of thinking that he can go through life ignoring the problems of other people. We are a world community, we are a world family. Saint Luke is a family. And this is why I'm thrilled to high heaven when again and ever so often I discover how some of you, thanks to this particular ministry that we have to persons with special needs -- get into the picture and try to help solve the problem of somebody else, because we cannot allow ourselves the luxury of pretending that it doesn't exist, or that it's not my responsibility. To be a Christian is always to be called a person who is responsible.

Can you understand this now, that when such a situation arises, we are in duty bound then to look around and to make a kind of inventory -- what can I do about it? What do I have to offer? That's a salutary thing. There's the problem, it may be somebody else's problem, but do I have anything that can be taxed? Do I have a resource that can be utilized?

Now let me anticipate your reaction. Chances are you might say to yourself, I do, but it's not much! And so we're about to close the book: what can I do that can help the problem? Because so frequently the problems are of such magnitude that they're beyond us. And so we excuse ourselves, just as the disciples did -- "...but what are they among so many?" . . . . or as one translation has it, "We only have five loaves! -- We only have two fish." But again I can say to you with all the strength I can command, from the Christian perspective, God always says, "Whatever you have, no matter how little it may be, you have enough by which to begin!"

Does that ever occur to you? Did it ever occur to you that love always has enough by which to begin. And that's the first thing that God requires of us, that we attempt some kind of a beginning! We don't have to succeed, but we're in duty bound to begin, with the little that we have. Can you understand this now? You might not be able to understand how Jesus takes five loaves and two fishes and has enough food then to feed five thousand people -- that doesn't bother me, really it doesn't. I know that it happened. I also know that it would never have happened if these conditions had not been met. There are always conditions required before a miracle can be performed. And I must say to you as earnestly as I can, I don't know of anything that God ever does by Himself and by Himself alone, aside from creation. From that time on, in order to meet the needs of His family -- the Family of Man -- He's been reaching for somebody else, to get them into the picture, to enable them, to motivate them to do something.

Before I walk away from this sacred desk I must tell you that when John records this miracle, he said that Jesus was putting the disciples to the test, to see how much they were willing to contribute, to see how much they were willing to become involved... and if they would pass the test. He Himself had the perfect answer. Now can you understand this when you deal with this miracle? God always has the answer. God knows how these things can be resolved. The only limitation lies in the human perspective: our unwillingness to offer what we have, our unwillingness to become involved in trying to meet the need of somebody else.

I believe in miracles, and the longer I live the more I recognize the necessity, not so much of faith in God's purposes, as I realize the necessity of faith in the

human factor, to believe that people are willing to respond to what God recommends. When you and I are willing to subscribe and to become obedient to what God says -- brace yourselves! -- something wonderful is bound to happen. This I most certainly believe.

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Sermon - Pastor Raymond Shaheen  
The Thirteenth Sunday After Pentecost  
September 6, 1981 - Labor Day

"IN THE BEGINNING"  
(John 1:2-3)

GRACE, mercy and peace from God  
our Father and from His Son Jesus  
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

He used to talk to me on company-time -- that's really just about the way it was. He was the night-time custodian, and when I would come here either for an appointment or an evening meeting, like as not I would find him busily engaged in his chores, in a class-room or in a hall-way. And it always seemed to me as though he was waiting for me to loom upon the horizon, because no sooner would I make my appearance but what he would engage me in conversation; and before I would realize it he would be quoting Scripture with a fair degree of enthusiasm, particularly, I discovered, that passage of Scripture with which he dealt the preceding Sunday. For I must tell you, he was not only our night-time custodian -- he also had a day-time job. But when Sunday came, he was a kind of free-lance preacher who would preach wherever he might get an invitation.

And once he told me in no uncertain manner that no matter where he would go, when he would stand up to preach, he would look the congregation over and recite four words from Scripture....and once he had quoted those four words, he put a question to the congregation. I was fascinated, and I asked him to tell me what the four words were and what the question had been.

Now, picture as best you can this little saint-in-ebony of ours, standing before a congregation, about to preach. Can't you hear him doing this:

"In the beginning God . . . "

"Do you believe these words?"

And once he put that question, he said, he'd say to them,

"You either believe these words or you don't; and if you don't believe them, there is no use in my going on preaching because everything that I'm going to tell you is based upon the affirmation of the fact of God . . . "

...a rather unconventional way, I dare say, to confront a congregation. But yet I'm quick to add, that's exactly the way it ought to be. For there ought never to be an encounter of a worship type, whether private or public, without first affirming the fact. That's the point at which a person is in duty bound to begin.

Why do I say this to you as earnestly as I do, even at the very beginning of this sermon? There are those who maintain, as I read material other than so-called

religious material, that God is rapidly disappearing from the horizon, that people don't much talk about God, that the eternal dimension is apparently lacking.

There was a day when a person sat down to make a will, and in the presence of legal counsel the draft would be drawn up. And what do you suppose would be the first statement? -- not, "I, John Smith, being of sound mind, do hereby bequeath . . ." The first statement was always this: "In the name of God . . ." honestly, there was a time when that sort of thing was done! And a man wouldn't even think of completing his earthly pilgrimage and then having his earthly goods distributed to others without introducing the God-factor.

Happy indeed is that person who is constantly affirming the fact of God. That's exactly what Scripture does. There isn't a person in the world who knows anything at all about the Bible who doesn't know that the very first words in the Bible are these: "In the beginning God . . ." -- that's the point at which the Scriptures begin. The Scriptures do not argue the existence of God. The Scriptures begin with the fact of God. And the Bible is a book about God. It's not a book about man! It's a book about God and His dealing with men, and the way people ought to deal with one another on the basis of the way God deals with them. The Bible affirms the fact of God.

-- Happy indeed is that person who writes the story of his own life, and who begins by affirming the fact of God. Because if you don't do it in an early chapter, chances are that we won't think much about God when we write the last chapter of our lives. And that's something to remember.

There was that enterprising Sunday School teacher-of-sorts who thought that she had to do something a bit novel when she went to the next Sunday School session, to capture the enthusiasm of her boys and girls. So she came up happily with this idea: that when it came time for the lesson period she would simply walk over to the chalk board, take the chalk in hand, and then write there two words. And then she'd ask for volunteers, someone who would get up and who would complete what she had written. And so, that's what she decided to do and that's exactly what she did that day. It was a bright-eyed youngster -- of course he'd be a bright-eyed youngster -- who stood up and walked over toward the chalk board, reached for the chalk, remembering the assignment the teacher had made, "Now complete what I have written." And here were the two words:

"GOD IS

....what do you suppose the youngster did? He put a period! It was as simple for him as all that -- with a wisdom undoubtedly beyond his years he was affirming the fact of God, the existence of God. And as far as he was concerned, that was it! That was complete! That was the story!

Fortunate indeed is any person who daily can affirm the existence of God -- and orders his days and his years on the basis of that fact! Now why do I tell you this? I am quite mindful that as I stand at the sacred desk today, on this particular day, it's the Sunday nearest a national holiday, Labor Day. There is a text for this sermon: the 2nd and 3rd verses of the first chapter of the Gospel according to John:

"The same was in the beginning with God.  
All things were made by him; and without  
him was not any thing made that was made."

You affirmed the fact of God. God exists.

Now let me ask you this question: Did you ever ask yourself the question -- What was God up to at the very beginning? The very first glimpse that you get of this God who exists, this God whose existence you affirm -- when the Bible opens a window into the fact of God -- what's He up to? What first comes to your mind when you think of God? As one who has had the spiritual sensitivity that becomes you, it could well be that you might be inclined to think -- if you are an artist and you were to first introduce people to the fact of God with some kind of imagery -- that you might present Him in a prayerful, contemplative mood: God with a kind of closed eyes and a bowed head, indicating the spirit of prayer . . . that isn't the first glimpse of God when you turn to the pages of the Bible, no matter how much you may cherish it. You don't get the first glimpse of God as God either having a prayer session by Himself or about to conduct a prayer meeting for other people.

Incidentally, when you first think of Jesus Christ, what's the picture you have of Him?

- preaching a sermon? (which He did)
- performing a miracle? (which He did)
- looking around for disciples -- His keen eye for an able,  
dedicated person with tremendous potential?  
(He did that sort of thing)
- teaching? having a counseling session on a one-to-one  
basis? (He spent a great deal of His time doing  
that sort of thing)

Well, like as not, when you and I think of Jesus Christ, we think of Him praying, or preaching, or performing miracles. Honestly we do!

When did it ever occur to you that an unforgettable glimpse of God, meant to be an unforgettable glimpse of God in Jesus Christ -- is when at the age of twelve He said something like this: "I've got to be about my Father's business! -- don't you know that?" And having said that, what did He do? For eighteen years He went down to Nazareth and was a carpenter, or a carpenter's apprentice. When you first think of

Jesus Christ, do you think of Him as we have Him pictured in one of these windows here on my right, standing in the carpenter's shop, presumably ankle-deep in wood shavings, holding a 2x4 in His hand! Who was the first workman? Good question. The first workman was God. "In the beginning God . . . " -- was doing something, creative -- making a world, laying His hands to useful and worthy tasks. You dare not forget that, my friend.

- God has a tremendous concern and a high and a holy regard for those who pray -- yes!
- for those who teach -- yes!
- for those who preach -- yes!

God has a high and holy regard for those who work! The very first glimpse that we get of God as we turn to the Bible is God-the master-workman: "In the beginning God created . . . " . . . in the beginning.

Oh, if I wanted to I'd ask you to think of God now flexing His muscles, God stretching forth His hand, gripping, and moulding, and fashioning something. That's your first glimpse of God.

I know a measure of despair, of course I do, when I see the number of people on occasion who waste their energies. To me it is sheer sacrilege to dissipate energy, to 'goof-off' at the job, to fail to give an honest day's work for an honest dollar. This, too, becomes the Christian. Martin Luther was absolutely right when he said, "The cobbler, the shoe-repairer, who takes a pair of shoes and repairs them decently and honorably, is doing a piece of work as acceptable to God as the priest who stands with folded hands before the altar and offers a prayer or the sacraments."

God does have a continuing interest in His world where people are meant to labor. In a certain sense, one of the very first commandments that God gave to man was "Here it is -- with My stamp upon it -- this world....make the most of it! Take care of it!"

There are many ways to picture Judgment. Let me try this one on you for size: When it's all over, God staring each one of us in the eye and saying, "I gave you this time on earth - - what on earth in Heaven's name did you do?" Don't get me wrong, I place a high value on your coming together here. I place a high value upon your facing an altar, I place a high value upon your giving attention to the interpretation of the Word. And with all the energy that God gives me I'll continue to ask you to come and cross the threshold of a place called holy. But God forbid that this should be the only place where you would think of God and relate to God -- as though this would be the only place where God is to be found and God is at work.....that you'd only think

about God when you sing a hymn, see candles flicker on an altar and chant an ancient liturgy -- important as all of this may be. You must never forget what Archbishop Temple (?) said, and said it so superbly, "God has a lot of other things in which He's interested beside religion!"

Nygun, the Swedish theologian, was absolutely right when he said, "We're all in the hollow of God's hand, whether with our belief or with our unbelief." The Scriptures are absolutely right when they maintain that God sees fit to use all of us in His work, either as tools, or as partners. Your first glimpse of God in the Scriptures remains: God laying His hands to a useful, worthy task, for the betterment of mankind.

Before I turn my back on the sacred desk I must again tell you, as I pay tribute to that devout Christian who looked upon the opportunity that God would give him to witness to Christ no matter where he would go. He did not confine his Christian ardor to a place such as this. A foreman in a shop, he would use his noon lunch-hour to talk to his co-workers about Jesus Christ. He did it well, - - not in any self-righteous way, not in any arrogant manner. But in a very winsome way he spoke a good word for Jesus Christ.

One day it paid off beautifully, handsomely, I dare say. A man to whom he spoke right then and there on the spot knelt down by his bench in the shop, and to use the magnificent way the Church has always put it, he gave his life to Jesus Christ. And as the foreman who had introduced him to Christ offered a prayer, the man -- the new convert for Jesus Christ -- got up from his knees and enthusiastically said to his friend, "Now what do I do next?" - - as though hopefully he would be given an assignment to teach a Sunday School class, or to become a member of a committee or something, intending to do something 'religious.' His friend shocked him by giving the perfect answer, "What do you do next? Right now? You make certain you give the boss a good day's work!"

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(transcribed as recorded)



"CHRISTMAS: GOD'S BRAND NEW IDEA"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from  
God our Father and from His  
Son Jesus Christ, our Blessed  
Lord. Amen.

Whether it's made its impression or now, I'm not quite certain, but I can tell you, it's been repeated Sunday by Sunday during this Advent season, a recurrent theme, phrased in these precise words:

"Christmas is God's idea - - "

I make no apology for repeating myself. There are some things that need to be said again and ever so often. I'm constrained to believe that this is one of them.

You see, God in His infinite wisdom and love thought up Christmas -- it was His idea, it wasn't ours. There is no committee here on earth that got together and said, "The world is so wicked, something needs to be done -- there needs to be some divine intervention - - God, let us write the agenda for you -- this is what we think you ought to do, this is the way we think you ought to do it, and now is the time!" . . . no one ever stormed Heaven's gates with that kind of thing. But the most wonderful thing that God has ever done for us, He thought up Himself.

And if I could make bold to suggest it, I'd phrase the title for this morning's sermon in this manner: "CHRISTMAS: GOD'S BRAND NEW IDEA" . . . a concept that had never been introduced before.

I make much of this, my friend, for the very simple reason. But there are any number of people that I know, any number of peo-

ple that you may know, who shy away from new ideas -- they have a resistance that's built in, that keeps them from fully appreciating what is being advanced. Particularly when it's being advanced for the very first time.

When I drove through Chevy Chase yesterday I was reminded of something that I had forgotten -- the fire equipment in Chevy Chase, what color is it painted? -- not the conventional, not the traditional red - - it's painted yellow.

Somewhere in my files I have a clipping of about seven years ago, when over in York, England, the local government decided to re-paint the fire equipment and to paint it the color yellow. It had been established, so I am told, by a scientific survey, that yellow is more easily distinguished as a color than red.

...when the Home Office heard about it, they countermanded the local people in York, and said, "Red is what it's been -- and red is what it will remain . . ." It was a new idea, you see! Nobody much thought to deal with the fact that maybe the survey is absolutely right! -- maybe yellow is more easily distinguished... People shy away from new ideas, honestly they do.

I enjoy going to Oxford town, in England. And when I go there I think many thoughts. Now when I go again I'll remember what I read in a newspaper -- I clipped it - - do you know that a few short years ago there was a woman, a hundred years of age, who was taken by ambulance to Oxford University in order to receive a degree to which, to all intents and purposes, she was entitled to 70 years ago. 70 years ago, I've forgotten her name now, she passed with distinction the physiology examination....but because no one ever thought of awarding a degree to a woman on an academic level 70 years ago, she had to wait, until she was a hundred years of age - - an idea, you see, whose time had not come! -- not because it wasn't needed, but because people weren't ready to respond to it.

I wish you could have gotten to know her when she lived with us -- Winifred's mother, the grandmother of your Associate Pastor. She'd share her life with us -- six months, while she could do it, she lived with us...then six months of the year she lived with her other daughter. She's now almost 97 years of age. She's in a nursing home, she's an invalid in a wheelchair.

When we last saw her, what do you suppose she told us? -- fairly gleefully . . . . well, first I should tell you that they have a very wonderful chaplain in that nursing home, and she's arranging for a Nativity play, a Nativity pageant to take place in Sycamore Manor. Guess who's going to be one of the shepherds? -- Grandma! -- in her wheelchair!

I can well imagine how that chaplain came to Grandma and said, "I've got an idea, Grandma, and you're in it. How about your being one of the shepherds!" ...and knowing her as I have come to know her across the years -- never one to resist something new -- I can well imagine she said, "Why not!" Fortunate indeed are they who can respond when a new idea, a new concept is advanced. To the best of my knowledge she had never been a shepherd in a Nativity play before. And now, at 96 years of age, she is one!

There's a text for this sermon, a text which has inspired the theme, that's inspired everything that you're going to hear until the sermon is concluded. And where is the text to be found? -- of all places, way back in the Old Testament, in the 13th chapter of the Book of Judges, the 8th verse:

"Then Manoa (that's the man's name)  
entreated the Lord, and said,  
O my Lord, let the man of God which thou didst  
send come again unto us, and teach us what we  
shall do unto the child that shall be born."

Now I've got to fill it in for you. It's an exciting chapter. Manoa is told that his wife is going to give birth to a child. This man who is going to become a father is told that this person is going to do wonderful works -- he's absolutely overwhelmed by what he's told. He can't quite comprehend it -- he'd never heard anything quite like this before! So what does he do? To his

everlasting credit he says to his wife, "let's ask the Lord to send back his messenger again, and then we'll put it to the messenger, and we'll tell the messenger that he'll have to help us understand what it is that's going to happen, lest we fail to come to grips with it." To his everlasting credit, he knew something wonderful was going to happen, but he didn't quite know how to handle it. So he asks God to help him.

Did it ever occur to you that that's about the way it is with Christmas -- this most wonderful thing that God does is absolutely overwhelming -- boggles the mind, it's a brand new idea. Can we be as honest as Manoah was, and say, "God, get somebody down here real quick -- help us to know how to handle this thing, to make the most of it, to do something with it."

Any number of people, I'm very sorry to say, have missed the real meaning of Christmas because they've never known how to handle it. It's a brand new idea -- God had never done anything like this before and for some people it's very easy to accept the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, who seems to act the same way, one generation after another. But now when He does something brand new -- if I may use that figure of speech -- they are so awestruck, astounded and overwhelmed that they fail to say, "God, you'd better help us."

I'm numbered among those who is always thrilled when I can ponder Luther's Catechism, Luther's bold attempt to help us understand the basic teachings of the church. His explanation of the Third Article of the Creed is magnificent. Luther gives us to understand that you and I can't even figure out much about God unless God helps us, unless God stoops to our level and we begin to see it by His help and through His eyes. God -- what did you have in mind when you decided to come in the form of Jesus Christ? God, help us to understand this concept . . . God-come-to-us-in-human-form.

There are some people who reject it, reject it on the ground that their idea of God is so wonderful that they can't quite figure out how a God would dirty Himself -- and let me say it crassly -- by messing around with a wicked

lot of people (that's a free translation).....who humbled Himself, became as low as we are! There are some people who just can't comprehend that. And they shy away from an idea as wonderful as that, because it's quite comfortable, you see, to deal with the old concept of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob, and of the prophets and of the judges. But to deal with a God as Ezekiel prophesied, when Ezekiel has God saying, "Behold I, even I, will come and seek my people. I will be to them as a shepherd."

So He came. Have you figured it out yet? Have you responded to this new idea? Some people have.

-- there was Matthew, going about his day's work, keeping the ledger...and then one day this wandering preacher comes and stands alongside of Him -- I can picture it -- just standing there for a while, never so much as saying a word, but looking at him....maybe putting His hand gently upon his shoulder, and then Matthew turning around and looking into the eyes of Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ saying to him: "Follow me" . . . and what He's really saying is this --

"Matthew, there's a better way! I've got a brand new idea for you. Why don't you close your books, come after me -- dare to find a brand new way of living!"

He did that you know, with the fishermen -- that's how He got Peter, that's how He got James, that's how He got John -- "Come on, James! Come on, John! Come on, Peter! There's a whole new way of living -- come on, let me tell you about it -- just follow me."

Don't misunderstand me -- God's always chuck full of new ideas. But for any number of us they are ideas whose time has not come, not because of the idea, but because of us.

I shudder, frankly, when I think of this whole nuclear arms business. Remember how, a Sunday or two ago, they tell me you became very uncomfortable when you saw me as a preacher of doom, death and destruction, alluding very somberly to the fact that ours is a civilization that could assassinate itself.

God has another idea -- "Behold I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all people -- a Savior who can show you the way to peace -- if only you give the idea a chance to catch on, to respond.

Our other son, Jon, who lives in New York and thoroughly enjoys living there, used to send me cartoons that he'd read in the New Yorker or some other publication. I have it somewhere in my files -- a hippy, standing outside a church door, reading what's written on the church bulletin board. It simply says, on the church bulletin board:

"A new commandment I give you:  
Love one another."

....and the hippie is there and the caption for his words is simply this: "Too bad that the idea never caught on."

Christmas is God's idea. Who knows what other wonderful things He has up His sleeve. We could miss them, you know, if we fail to let them catch on.

Permit me to tell you this: every now and then I say to a staff member here at Saint Luke, when I realize my position here as Senior Pastor and my responsibility to them as staff members -- I say to them in all earnestness, "By the grace of God I'm vitally interested in every phase of the work, every phase of the work. And because I

am, every now and then I may pass on to you an idea. And I would hope that you might respect it, unless you can come up with something better." And I think maybe that's the way God deals with us. God says, "The Bible is my idea book! Read it! Study it!

-- come to grips with it!"

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(transcribed as recorded)

*"Wait 'Till This Day"  
(at Touch of Madonna)*

GRACE, MERCY and Peace from God  
our Father and from His Son Jesus  
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

He was my mentor throughout all of my college and theological seminary days. From the day that I first met him his shadow was cast benignly upon me, and I remember so well the advice he gave me when I was graduating from the Trinity School. This he said to me: "When the congregation calls you to be their Pastor, you will go to them and you will serve them as though they were your first and your only congregation." I heeded his advice. It was sound, and reasonable. And so I served that parish before I came to you.

Then in God's plan I became your Pastor, and I looked upon you as the second of the congregations that I would serve, and perhaps my last.

About a month ago I was given the privilege to assist in a wedding at a Roman Catholic church. As I was donning my vestments in the sacristy, my eyes fell upon a little plaque which someone reverently had put there for the officiating priest to read before he would go to the chancel. This was the sentiment -- exceedingly precious, I dare say:

SERVANT OF GOD, Say this Mass this day as though  
it were your first Mass;

Say this Mass this day as though it were your  
only Mass;

Servant of God, Say this Mass this day as  
though it were your last Mass.

Why do I bring this to your attention now? As I came to Christmas this year I made up my mind that I would do something that for some strange reason I had never done before -- I would live this Christmas as though it were my first, my last, my only Christmas. Now there's nothing morbid about that at all. It's been a very rewarding experience for me. Having made up my mind that that's the way it would be, I've never had a Christmas quite like this one.

I can honestly admit to you that I've never experienced so much love in all my life as I have this Christmas-tide . . . I have never observed so much good will as I've observed this Christmas-tide. Could it be, do you suppose, that it



that it lies within me, that my frame of mind could be such that this would be the environment in which I should so easily find myself, I could say, "This Christmas -- let it be as though it were my first, my last, my only Christmas -- let me live it with complete abandon.

There's a text for this brief meditation -- familiar words:

"For unto you is born this day . . . "

...a day like none other in the history of the human race, a very special day, a very God-like day, in which God did something - - - may I say it for you this way? -- as though it were His first, His last, His only chance to do something perfectly sublime. From our human perspective, dare we make so bold as to put it this way? God's first Christmas! He gave it to us with complete abandon, with a touch of daring, and I dare say, with a touch of madness. That shouldn't be difficult for you to understand.

Haven't you seen how some people act like mad these days? -- doing things that seem crazy, talking to people that they'd never think of talking to before. But when Christmas comes, they smile, they stop to speak, they greet: "A merry Christmas!" ....it's happening....."A merry Christmas to you, sir!"...."A merry Christmas!" It will happen tonight! It will happen tomorrow! -- acting like crazy -- talking to people that you've never talked to before! - - and having a reservoir of good will for people who three weeks ago would have irritated you no end! But now it's Christmas!

....you even gave a generous sum of money to that newsboy, who annoyed you, the way he crossed your lawn, or never quite saw how he could put your newspaper inside the storm door when it was raining.....but at Christmas-time -- an extravagant gesture on your part, you act like crazy, with a touch of madness -- that's Christmas! That's Christmas.

Think of God -- I say it advisedly -- with a touch of madness -- leaving Heaven, recklessly, daringly coming down to earth to those of us so undeserving, and without desiring Him . . . living among us - - and with a touch of madness, let me say it again, defying the logic, walks up to this person and walks up to that person and taps the potential that lies within him and dares him to live life to the full as he had never known that it could be lived -- tapping a Matthew, tapping an Andrew, tapping a Simon Peter -- investing, with a touch of madness, in a man like Judas Iscariot. It defies all of our logic.

But that's our God for you! -- coming to us with complete abandon, making

the most of whatever it is that He's about to do so sublimely, so perfectly, so completely . . . so much so that when it was all over they could look back and say, "Ah, yes, that Jesus who came to us, He's the one who said, 'I have come that you might have life, and that you might have it abundantly -- to the full, every single measure of it.'"

As I stand among you now I think of how those who remember how He came to us -- Jesus Christ, God in human form, . . .

-- God, who knew very well what they had done to the prophets that He had sent....

-- God, who knew very well how they had treated the priests, and the kings.....

God, in such a daring manner, saying, "I'll go myself -- I'll humble myself, I'll stoop to their level -- -- I will go to them that they might be one day as I am." Every now and then we discover that there are those who take Him at His word and follow in His footsteps -- providing us with a touch of madness. And by that I mean an illogical thing, a daring thing, something of great risk.

I've been musing tonight -- I think in my lifetime I've seen at least five or six different popes sit on the throne of St. Peter's. I have my favorite -- Pope John 23rd -- he's claimed my heart from the very beginning, and I'll tell you why. The first Christmas he was Pope, he did that very daring thing, that very reckless thing. Instead of allowing himself to be surrounded in the Vatican by a people whose halos were clearly evident, he dared to leave the Vatican and go to a jail. And what did he say to the prisoners? -- "I came to you because you could not come to me." That's Christmas! -- how God-like. At Christmas God is saying to us, "You wouldn't think to come to me -- you could not come to me. So I have come to you, I have humbled myself, I've stooped to your level, because I love you."

There's another chapter in the life of Pope John 23rd. It was when he was a Cardinal in northern Italy, and it was on a Christmas Eve. He had a great burden on his heart. Throughout the years he had come to have a relationship with an alcoholic priest. He could not free his mind on that Christmas Eve of that priest who carried so great a burden. So as a Cardinal, he said to his Monsigneur, his secretary, "Would you drive me to a certain section of the city?" The Monsigneur knew at once that it was a place of ill repute, but he followed the Cardinal's orders. They parked the car outside a particular spot....the Monsigneur ~~RATHER~~ **RELUCTANTLY** goes in, comes out, and says, "He is not there" -- because he knew for whom he should look. The Cardinal said, "But I think he is --

go back in again." The Monsigneur went back in, came out to say, "Him I did not see, but I saw a cassock on a hook."

(now a cassock is that long black garment that the priest wears)  
....and the Cardinal says, "Well, if there's a cassock on the hook, there must be a priest near somewhere. You go back." He went in, and of course he did find him, at a table, with a bottle in one hand and a deck of cards in the other. The Monsigneur startled him and said, "You will come with me, his Eminence the Cardinal is outside and wants to see you." "My God," says the priest, "-- in this condition!" "You'll come with me," said the Monsigneur.

....reluctantly the priest goes. Embarrassed he stands before the Cardinal, only to hear the Cardinal say, "The confessor to whom I usually make confession is not available tonight. I need to make confession. Will you hear my sins?" The priest who had been afflicted with alcoholism says, "Ma! - in my condition? -- I cannot assume the responsibility of hearing your confession of your sins." The man of God, the Cardinal says, "But I will assume that responsibility. Hear my sins - I make my confession: Bless me, Father, for I have sinned . . ." says the Cardinal.

When he had completed his confession and received absolution, the Cardinal stands and puts his arms around the alcoholic priest and says, "Now you know who you are, and who you are meant to be" -- with complete abandon, you see, in that reckless, daring way, with this touch of madness, the man of God brings a redeeming touch to a man whose life is transformed from that moment on, defying all logic, you see -- who would have thought of doing that! Who would have believed that it was worth the investment?

But that's our G for you -- going on loving us, never stopped loving us, dealing with every single one of us as though we were His only child -- asking us to look upon each day as though it would be our only day, and giving us the strength and the energy by which to live that day to the full.

"Servant of God, say this Mass this day as though it were your first Mass - Say this Mass this day as though it were your only Mass. Servant of God, say this Mass this day as though it were your last Mass." - -

- - try living every Christmas, try living every single day as though it were your only day, filled by the grace that God alone can channel through it....

Maybe some day it will make sense to us, and then Heaven will touch earth all over again. This I most certainly believe.

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(This sermon transcribed as recorded)